ALFRED

APRIL 35¢

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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Dear Readers:

As you see by this month's cover, I am WANTED. Let me assure you, however, that I am WANTED in the fullest and most flattering sense of the word, and by an admiring public, instead of by the law enforcement authorities. You see how deceptive appearances can be?

All this is by way of leading up to an important announcement which I now make to my readers and viewers. Some of you belong in one category, some in both. At any rate, you are no doubt aware of the fact that ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS now appears for thirty minutes on Tuesday evenings, on the NBC network. As of next season, this popular program will be seen on Sunday evenings, on the CBS network, and for a full hour instead of its present thirty minutes. I make this announcement well in advance of the actual change, in order to give you ample time in which to rearrange your social lives, and reschedule household activities. Tact is required, of course, to fend off those compulsive talkers, friends or family, who are incapable of remaining silent for more than five minutes, and who may also have the bad habit of "dropping in" unannounced and unwanted, on Sunday evenings. The new schedule may also prove useful in disciplining small fry; homework must be done before entertainment may be indulged in. I leave the details to you, of course. Forewarned is forearmed.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

BEAUTY AND THE BEASTS *by Allen Kim Lang* 104

SHORT STORIES

PUT YOURSELF IN MY PLACE *by Clark Howard* 2
CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CASES *by Richard Hill Wilkinson* 14
FLORA AFRICANA *by De Forbes* 26
FREE TRANSLATION *by Joe Mackey* 36
NEVER HANG ANOTHER *by Bryce Walton* 44
LET ME READ YOUR TEA-LEAVES *by Wade H. Mosby* 56
MAKE YOUR PITCH *by Borden Deal* 62
DOWN TO THE SEA IN FORMALDEHYDE *by Tom MacPherson* 75
DOUBLE TROUBLE *by Robert Edmond Alter* 86
TOP-FLIGHT AQUARIUM *by William Link & Richard Levinson* .. 94

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PUT YOURSELF IN MY PLACE

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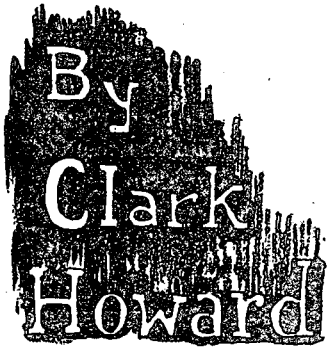
Nowadays one may frequently appoint a proxy to stand in one's stead, at stockholders' meetings, gratis. Not so long ago, one often hired a proxy to go into battle in one's stead. No money changed hands in this case, but the result was the same.

Two uniformed officers brought him into the main jail at four o'clock in the morning and took him into the booking office. They searched him and took away all his personal belongings except his cigarettes and handkerchief. Then, while one of them fingerprinted him, the other one wrote out a re-



ceipt for everything they had taken and gave it to him. After that they marked the gun they had found on him and put it in a filing cabinet labeled: EVIDENCE LOCKER.

The desk sergeant asked him his name and he told him it was George Carter. Asked if he had ever been arrested before, he said no. After a dozen more routine questions they booked him for armed robbery. He was taken downstairs to the lockup and put in a cell by himself.

After he was locked up, he lighted a cigarette and stretched out on one of the four empty bunks. What a rotten break! he thought bitterly. What a lousy, rotten piece of luck!

Two hours earlier, after a week of careful planning, he had gone into a medium-sized midtown liquor store just before closing time and pulled off what should have been a perfect holdup. He had forced the night manager to close up while he was inside, then had locked the frightened man in the washroom in the back while he rifled the store. It had turned out to be a nice haul; two or three hundred from the register and, as he had expected, about three thousand from the safe in the office. And he had helped himself to four bottles of the best Scotch in the place just before leaving.

Up to that point everything had come off just right. He was already thinking what a nice vacation he could take when he added this haul

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to the money he still had left from his last job; the fifteen hundred he had tucked away in a safe deposit box. That would make nearly five grand altogether; enough for maybe three or four months in Mexico City if he didn't live too high. And he wouldn't. He never had been a big spender. A modest apartment somewhere, a couple of suitcases of good clothes, loafing around in the warm Mexican sun in the afternoons, jai lai or the dogtrack and a few drinks in the evening, the bullfights or Acapulco on Sundays, maybe a friendly little waitress or cashier for an occasional night on the town—and that was that. His needs were simple, not too expensive, not much more than the average working stiff on his annual vacation. The only difference was that where the working stiff labored all year for his pleasure, he himself worked only a few minutes at each job, usually no more than four times a year. And for the past three years he had been doing quite well at his chosen profession.

But it's all over now, he thought. It had ended suddenly and unexpectedly when he had let himself out of the liquor store and walked right into the night manager's brother who had come to drive him home. That in itself might not have been too bad; under other circumstances, he might have slugged the guy and still gotten away clean. But it didn't work that way. The night manager's brother was a vice squad cop, off duty at the time but nevertheless armed. Needless to say, he was immediately suspicious, seeing a stranger coming out of the darkened liquor store with both coat pockets bulging. He had come up with his gun already out and George was caught.

Now, just two hours later, George was in a cell facing an armed robbery rap. And the phony name he gave the booking sergeant wasn't going to help him much either. Within forty-eight hours they'd have a make on his prints from the FBI and find out his name wasn't George Carter at all. They'd find out he was George Maxwell and had done time twice before; two years for burglary 'way back when he was just a punk, and five years on another armed robbery, a sentence he had just completed three years ago. So he had been on the street for thirty-six months and now, when they got his record, he would be facing twenty years under the habitual criminal statutes. He was thirty-five now; a twenty-year bit would just about finish him.

Just a bad piece of luck, he thought again, sighing heavily as he saw the last of his thoughts of Mexico City fade away. He dropped his cigarette to the cement floor

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and let it burn out. Then he turned his face to the wall and thought about what was ahead.

It was only about an hour later, not even daylight, when they brought in the nervous man with the glasses. George was alerted when the cell door was unlocked, but he did not look up. He just lay quietly and listened until the cell was locked again and the turnkey's footsteps faded down the tier. Then he raised up to see who his roommate was.

The man was well-dressed; at least, he had on a good suit and white shirt and necktie and his shoes were shined. He was about George's age, a little thinner, a little less hair. He sat tensely on the edge of one of the bunks, anxiously fishing out a cigarette and having trouble striking a match to light it.

Noting the man's nervousness, George thought he might be a junkie. He was about to lie back down and ignore him, but just then the man saw that he was awake and got up and came over to the bunk directly opposite George's.

"Excuse me," said the man, his voice quaking slightly, "can you tell me how I go about getting word to a lawyer? I forgot to ask the policeman outside."

George shrugged. "You're entitled to one phone call," he said. "Didn't they tell you that when they booked you?"

The man shook his head. "No," he said, looking confused.

"They should have," said George. "What they got you on?"

The man looked at George dumbly. "What?"

"What's the beef?" George repeated. "What'd you do?"

Now the man smiled rather weakly. "Oh, I didn't do anything. I mean, not really. I'm a witness, you see, and I ran away so I wouldn't have to testify. Now they're coming to take me back."

George wrinkled his brow, watching the man closely. "I don't quite get you, pal."

"It's really very simple," the man explained. "You see, my name is Harold Craig. I was a bookkeeper back in Kansas City. I worked for an accounting firm that audited books for various businesses. Well, one of the companies we serviced was owned by this man Alfred Tulo—maybe you've heard of him?"

George's eyes widened at the remark. *'Maybe'* he had heard of him! Big Al Tulo, one of the really big powers in the Midwest mob. One of the chief officers in the national syndicate. One of the accepted leaders of the legendary American Mafia. And this square wondered if George had ever heard of him!

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George gave the man a rather nauseated smile and nodded his head. "I know who you mean. Go ahead."

Harold Craig cleared his throat. "Well, we—that is, the firm—didn't know anything about this company Mr. Tulo owned. All we were responsible for was keeping the books in balance, you see. And I was the one in charge of the account.

"I did most of the auditing myself, but as I said, it was simply a matter of figures and account names. No actual knowledge of the company's business operations was required.

"Well, one day while I was balancing the audit for the third quarter, several men came into the office. They were federal officers and they had subpoenas for everyone, including me. It seems they were conducting some kind of investigation into Mr. Tulo's businesses. They even had a court order requiring Mr. Tulo to produce all his books and accounts in court. Of course, as it turned out, Mr. Tulo wouldn't have been able to bring his books to court anyway, because the very next day—a Saturday, when no one was around—a fire broke out in the office and burned everything in the place. It was certainly a coincidence that such a thing would happen right at that time, but it did."

George smiled knowingly. Yeah, some coincidence. He could just picture Tulo's boys sneaking in the back door with cans of kerosene.

"Anyway," Harold Craig went on, "that very night two of Mr. Tulo's associates came to my apartment and said Mr. Tulo wanted to see me. I thought he wanted me to try to reconstruct his accounts because he asked me if I remembered the names in the books. I told him yes, I could probably recall most of them. Then I got the surprise of my life. Mr. Tulo said he wanted me to leave town and not show up in court to testify. Of course, I told him I couldn't possibly do that because it would be against the law. Well, that didn't impress him very much. Very calmly he said, 'Okay, boys, put a hundred pounds of concrete on his feet and dump him in the river.' Just like that! And he meant it, too, he really did!"

No kidding, thought George. *Man, how square can one guy be?* "So how'd you get out of it?" he asked Craig.

"I almost didn't," said Harold. "But it seemed that Mr. Tulo was a little reluctant to have me killed, since there had been some unfavorable publicity already about the fire. So he finally agreed to the original plan of having me leave town. He gave me five thousand dollars and the name of a lawyer in Los An-

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geles to contact when that ran out. And he warned me not to come back. He said he'd never let me testify even if it meant having me shot right on the witness stand. And I believe him, too."

"You'd better believe him," George said quietly. "From what I've heard of Big Al, he'd do it. How'd they catch up with you anyway?"

Harold shook his head dumbly. "I don't know. I've been moving around a lot since I left. I just got to town three days ago. I even used a fictitious name when I registered at the hotel. All I know is that about one o'clock this morning when I got back from a late movie, three detectives were waiting in my room. They brought me down here and one of them said there would be a Marshal here to take me back on the morning train. That's why I wanted to see a lawyer, to try and stop them from taking me back."

"Save your money, pal," George told him. "If that Marshal is on his way, it means he's already got an extradition warrant signed. There's not a thing in the world you can do but go along with him."

"Oh," said Craig helplessly. He sat staring at the floor, turning slightly pale, probably, George thought, thinking about his future. Just as George himself was thinking now about his own future. His, of course, was probably better than Craig's, but not much better. An hour ago he would have sold his chances of beating a twenty-year rap for a nickel. But now things were a little different. Now maybe he had a chance, a faraway, outside chance. Because all the while Harold Craig had been telling his story, a crazy idea had been running through George's head. And the more he thought about it, the less crazy it became, until right now it looked like the chance of a lifetime.

George stretched out on his bunk and laced his hands behind his head. Looking up at the ceiling, he said casually, "No sir, Harold, a lawyer couldn't help you at all. The only person in the world who can help you is me."

Thirty minutes later Harold still wasn't convinced. "I don't know—" he kept saying reluctantly.

"Harold, I *know* it'll work," said George urgently. "Look, let's go over it one more time. First we change clothes, see, and you give me your glasses. There's not that much difference in our appearances; let's face it, Harold, we're both pretty average looking. Then when that marshal comes, I'll go with him in your place. You just stay in the cell, see? I'm pretty sure nobody in the booking office will recognize the

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switch because at eight o'clock the night shift will go off and the day men will come on duty. The Marshal will check me out instead of you. I'll go back with him on the train and when we get to Kansas City I'll tell them who I am. They'll check my prints and find out I'm not lying—and they'll have to let me go!"

"I don't understand," said Harold, puzzled. "Why will they have to let you go?"

"Because all of this will be happening tomorrow morning, an hour or so after the train gets to Kansas City. I'll spring it on them right away. I'll demand a lawyer immediately. When they get a make on me, they'll find out I'm not wanted anywhere and they won't have anything to hold me on. They have to let me go, Harold; its the law."

Harold still could not understand. "But you'll be wanted here, won't you? When they find out you're out instead of me."

"No, Harold," George explained patiently. "They'll still think you're me because you won't tell them any different, not right away, at least. See, you just stay here in my place until they come to take me for an arraignment. You go up in front of a judge and he'll read off a charge of armed robbery to you and then you plead not guilty. They'll ask you if you have a lawyer and you say no. The court will appoint a public defender for you then. And that's all there is to it. They'll take you back to your cell and within the next day or two the public defender will come to see you. That's when you cop out, Harold."

"What? I what?"

George sighed heavily. "That's when you tell them who you are, Harold," he said patiently.

"Oh. Well, what happens to me then? What will they do to me for helping you get out?"

"Not a thing!" said George happily. "That's the beauty of it, Harold. You tell them I hit you in the head with my shoe or something. I knocked you out, see? And you were still groggy when they took you in for the arraignment; you didn't know what was going on. All you've got to do is act a little stupid. Believe me, when the public defender finds out you're not me, he'll have you sprung in an hour. There won't be anything they can hold you on; all the papers on you will go back with the Marshal and me."

"Well," said Harold, "I don't know—I can't help thinking something will go wrong."

"So what if it does?" snapped George, losing some of his patience now as their valuable time kept slipping away. It was after six

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o'clock already and the lockup was beginning to come awake. If he and Harold were going to change clothes they would have to do it quickly or it would be too late.

"Look," George said evenly, "if something should go wrong, you'd just be right back where you started. You wouldn't be any worse off than you are right now. At least if we try it, you've got a chance of getting out." He paused a moment, then added ominously, "Or maybe you want to go back and face Tulo?"

Harold stiffened at the mention of Big Al's name. "No—no, I don't! I'm not crazy! I don't want to get killed!"

"Well, act like it then!" George said sharply. He started unbuttoning his shirt. "Come on, let's make the switch while there's still time."

Quickly, without giving it any more thought, Harold started undressing.

At eight-thirty, about an hour after they had finished the sugarless oatmeal and black coffee the jailer had brought in, an officer from the booking squad came down to take Harold out. George, now neatly dressed in Harold's clothes, winked and gave Harold a confident nod just before he stepped out of the cell to be taken away. He thought Harold looked a little sick and only hoped that he wouldn't crack during the next thirty-six hours. Time was the essential element in the plan; if Harold blew the whistle too soon, the whole thing would come apart. George kept his fingers crossed all the way upstairs.

In the booking office he was given an envelope containing Harold's personal effects—watch, wallet and comb—and a second, smaller envelope containing seventy-two dollars and some change. That would just about cover the bus fare to get back to his safe deposit box, George thought. He signed a receipt for the articles; the booking officer didn't even bother to compare the signatures.

They took him into the release office and he waited there until he was called into one of the private offices. Inside he was met by a uniformed jail captain and a younger man, husky and clean-cut looking, wearing a business suit. The Marshal, thought George. My escort out of here; my ticket away from a twenty-year rap.

The captain read aloud the federal court order for Harold's extradition, then gave George a copy and formally released him into the custody of the Marshal. The young man stepped over to George and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

"My name's Downer," he said evenly. "You and I are taking the morning train for Kansas City.

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It's a fourteen-hour trip. You can make it easy or you can make it hard. It's up to you."

All business, George thought. *Real stuffy type. Probably won't even talk to me the whole trip. Oh well, so what. I've got no complaints. I'm doing okay.* He smiled easily as the cuffs were snapped on his wrists. "You'll get no trouble from me," he said politely. "All I want to do is get it over with."

"That's fine," said the Marshal. "Let's get going then; the train leaves in less than an hour."

Downer said goodbye and shook hands with the captain, then he and George went out to the back of the building where a radio car was waiting to drive them to the depot.

At the terminal Downer thanked the driver, then he and George went inside. Downer checked their tickets at the reservations desk. "We're in compartment six, car nine," he said, taking George's arm loosely and directing him toward the passenger gates. On the way, Downer stopped at the cigar counter and picked up several magazines. "You smoke?" he asked.

"Yeah," said George, a little surprised.

"What brand?"

George told him and Downer brought him two packs of cigarettes. "Thanks," said George, feeling a little funny taking a favor from a cop. *Maybe it won't be such a bad trip, after all,* he thought.

Downer paid for the purchases and took George's arm again. "Well, let's get aboard," he said. They walked through the gate and down a long incline toward the tracks.

"Nice of you," said George, indicating the cigarettes he still carried in his hand.

Downer smiled. "Well, it's going to be a long trip. Besides, it's not like you're actually a criminal; you're just a witness that got scared. Nobody can blame you much for that."

They came to car nine and climbed aboard. The porter was just putting Downer's suitcase on the luggage rack when they got to the compartment. Downer indicated the seat by the window and George sat down.

"What time do we get to Madison?" Downer asked the porter.

"Eleven a.m., suh," said the porter. "'Bout an hour after we pull out. It's the first stop. But I thought you gentlemen was goin' all the way through to Kansas City."

"I might want to get a wire off at Madison," said Downer by way of explanation. "Let me know ten

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minutes before we get there." He handed the porter a dollar.

"Yes, suh. Thank you, suh."

After the porter left, Downer took off George's cuffs and let him remove his coat, then handcuffed one of his wrists to the arm of the seat next to the window. Then Downer took off his own coat and hung it up. George noticed that he carried a .45 automatic in his shoulder holster.

Downer selected one of the magazines he had purchased and offered the others to George. "Like to read a little?" he asked.

"Yeah," said George, a little surprised for the second time. "Yeah, sure. Thanks."

Downer sat down in the single lounge chair and began to thumb idly through his magazine. *This guy's all right,* George thought. *Boy, you sure can't beat a Federal cop for class. Real gentlemen.*

A few minutes later the train moved out of the terminal and made its way slowly out to the city limits. Then it gradually picked up speed until it was streaking past the broad flat farmlands at ninety-five miles an hour. The country flashed by the window and George sat holding the magazines on his knees and watching the scenery. After awhile he looked back at Downer and studied him momentarily. The young man was reading intently, his face serious but not stern. George noticed a class ring on one of his fingers. *College man,* he thought. He reached for a cigarette. It occurred to him that he wouldn't even have any smokes if it had not been for Downer's thoughtfulness. He decided to try an attempt at conversation.

"Say, how'd a nice young fella like you ever get a job like this anyway?" he asked pleasantly.

Downer looked over at him and

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smiled. "A man has to make a living," he said. "Besides, I like the work I do. One of the main things in life is to like your work, don't you think so?"

"I guess you're right," said George, thinking of his own work. He had to admit he had always liked it. Except, of course, for the three times he got caught.

"How about you?" asked Downer. "You're an accountant, aren't you?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure." Watch it, he warned himself.

"I imagine that pays pretty well, doesn't it?"

"Well, yeah, pretty good," said George.

"Especially working for someone like Al Tulo, eh?"

George remembered the story Harold had told him a few hours earlier. "Well, you see," he explained, "I didn't exactly work for Tulo himself. I worked for this outfit that took care of his books, that's all."

Downer nodded. "You must know a lot about those books for Tulo to try so hard to keep you out of court."

"Yeah—well, I guess so," said George.

The conversation lagged after awhile and George turned back to the window. In its reflection he noticed that Downer had resumed reading. *Wonder how old Harold's making out?* he thought. *Boy, that poor sucker is really going to get it when they find out what's happened. No judge in the world is going to believe he didn't know what he was doing when he went to court in my place. They'll probably give him five years just on general principles. Oh well, better him than me.*

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. Downer got up and opened it a few inches. It was the porter.

"Pulling into Madison in ten minutes, suh," he said. "Did you want that telegram sent?"

"No, I changed my mind," said Downer. He pulled out another dollar and handed it through the door. "Thanks anyway."

George eyed Downer curiously as he closed the door. "Tip kind of heavy, don't you?" he said.

Downer smiled. "Kind of." He came over and picked up the magazines from the seat beside George. "Through with these?" he asked.

George nodded and watched as Downer took his suitcase off the rack, opened it and put the magazines inside. He was surprised then to see Downer putting on his coat. "Going someplace?" he asked, half jokingly.

"Getting off here," said Downer, smiling. He bent over the suitcase,

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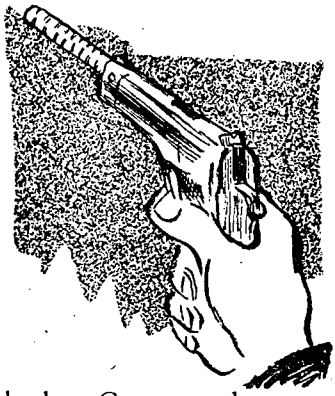

his back to George, and rummaged around inside for a moment.

"What do you mean?" said George. "I thought I was going all the way to Kansas City?"

"You are," said Downer, "but I'm not."

The young man turned around then and George saw what he was doing. Very professionally Downer was fitting a heavy silencer onto the barrel of his .45.

"You didn't think Mr. Tulo was going to let you get on that witness stand, did you, Harold?" he said easily.

George swallowed loudly. So that was it! This guy was no marshal, he was a torpedo! That was why he asked the porter what time we got to Madison. George had a sudden wild urge to burst out laughing.

"Now wait a minute, pal," he said quickly, "you've got the wrong boy. I'm not Harold. My name's George Maxwell. We pulled a switch, see? Back at the jail. We—"

Downer smiled widely. "Oh come on now, Harold. You're not going to try and con me, are you?" The silencer was in place now and he drew the slide back and let it slam forward, throwing a round into the chamber.

"Look, I'm telling you the truth!" said George urgently. I was up on an armed robbery beef, see, and they put this square, Harold, in the cell with me. We pulled a switch, I tell you!"

"Sure, Harold," said Downer. "Sure, you did."

George sat with his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide, looking helplessly at the clean-cut young man before him. He still had that crazy urge to burst out laughing when the young man shot him in the head.

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You can get an argument most anywhere in Ashley, Massachusetts, about the result of the murder trial of Ralph Hubert. There are those who agree with the jury, which decided after listening to testimony for more than two months, that Ralph was guilty as charged and deserved what he got. Then there are those who will tell you importantly that they know for a fact that Ralph was as innocent as the flowers that bloom in the spring. They'll produce some facts and ask some questions—questions that

have never been answered—to support their theories.

This reporter wasn't so sure . . .

The first newspaper story hinting that the pattern for murder had begun six months prior to the actual deed appeared on June 21, 1950, the second day of the trial. The prosecution proved that in November of 1949 Ralph had insured Bessie's life for $50,000. That was six months prior to the day when Bessie's body was found in the cellar of the Hubert farm. Evidence showed that she had been beaten about the head by a heavy instrument—a stove poker was introduced as evidence—her hands and feet had been bound, she was gagged and her body had been burned horribly. But death had been caused by drowning.

Let's go back to November, 1949. The Huberts lived on a farm on the outskirts of Ashley. Ralph was the last of his line and the only member of the family who didn't have an agrarian turn of mind. He disliked working in the soil. He had no rapport whatever with animals. Instead, he liked gadgets. He was of an inventive nature. He had rigged up a workshop of sorts in the old carriage shed which was attached to the huge barn. Here he

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Circumstantial evidence is generally considered indispensable to the successful prosecution of criminal cases. Is it possible, do you think, for inanimate objects to lie? The corpus delicti is mute, yet tells a tale.

spent most of his time, tinkering.

Any of the neighbors will verify the fact that Bessie Hubert was a nagger. She also came from a long line of farmers. She understood nothing else and when it became evident, two years after her marriage, that Ralph's interest was not

in making a crop or improving the blood line of the modest herd of Holstein milk cows which he had inherited from his father, she took him to task. She did it verbally and discovered to her own surprise—and possible pleasure—that she had a heretofore hidden talent for laying things on the line in a graphic and colorful manner. She developed a high pitched and raucous voice, which, on a still clear night, could be heard all the way down to the crossroads general store a quarter of a mile away.

The more Bessie nagged, the more she seemed to enjoy herself. She developed a vocabulary that staggered the imaginations of the listening loiterers at the general store. They felt sorry for Ralph, which probably accounts for the many character witnesses who testified at his trial. By the same token, we can also assume that Bessie's nagging was the reason why Ralph spent more and more time in his workshop.

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Which brings us to that day in November, 1949 when Ralph took out the $50,000 insurance policy. What prompted him to do it? To Cary Bryant, the county attorney who prosecuted the case, it was as plain as ABC. He intended to murder his wife so that he could collect the benefits. A common motive for murder. Obvious. Clear cut. Definite.

This reporter wasn't so sure. This reporter took the trouble to track down the salesman who had sold Ralph the policy. He found him working out of the company's main office in Worcester. His name was Charlie Talbot, a balding man of 40 with a glib tongue and a suave manner who could put on and take off a smile as though he carried it in his pocket.

Talbot grinned when asked if he remembered the murder trial of Ralph Hubert. Indeed he did, and for a good reason. Wasn't it he, Charlie Talbot, who had provided the motive for murder?

"You mean it was you who sold Mr. Hubert the fifty thousand dollar policy on his wife?"

"It was indeed."

"Do you recall any details of the transaction?"

"You bet I do! For one thing, I could hear Mrs. Hubert yelling at her husband clear down at the end of the lane where I parked my car."

"Do you recall what she was yelling about?"

"She was chewing him out for not doing something during the dry season about water seeping into their cellar from Waunick Lake every spring."

"How long did the tirade last?"

"Till she saw me coming up the lane. Then she went into the house and banged the door."

"Then what happened?"

Charlie Talbot then provided one of those odd bits of information which are usually associated with story book murders and which seem unimportant when first mentioned, yet which later prove to have a highly significant bearing on the decision reached by a jury.

Talbot had followed Ralph Hubert into his workshop. When he explained his mission, that of selling insurance, Ralph couldn't have appeared less interested. That's when Talbot pulled his rabbit out of the hat.

Besides the customary briefcase which is every insurance salesman's badge of office, Charlie had with him a case about the size of those which are used to carry portable typewriters.

"Got something I want to show you," he told Ralph with a conspiratorial grin. Without waiting for a reply, he snapped open the case, pulled out a few wires and

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stepped back. "Ever see one of those?"

Ralph stared at the gadget with only mild interest. "Dunno's I have. What is it?"

"A tape recorder." Charlie plugged in the recorder and threw a switch. There was a low humming sound. Then, with bell-like clarity, a woman's voice filled the workshop. It extolled the virtues of the insurance company for which Charlie worked. A man's voice followed telling about the money he had collected following the unexpected death of his wife—money that enabled him to live in comfort and security for the rest of his days.

Talbot watched the expression on Ralph's face closely while the testimonials were being delivered. "It changed from utter astonishment," he remembered, "to one of complete awe and disbelief. It wasn't until I put on another tape, plugged in the mike and recorded Hubert's own voice that he became convinced it wasn't some kind of trick."

It must be remembered that tape recorders were just coming into popular favor for home use in the fall of 1949. Insurance Agent Talbot had had the foresight and the ingenuity to capitalize on their newness as a sales gimmick. Whether or not he knew that Ralph Hubert was a gadget man and was considered by the townspeople as a bit eccentric is unimportant. What is important is that he sold Ralph a $50,000 insurance policy on his wife.

Why? Why did Ralph buy that policy? Was it the smart salesmanship of Charlie Talbot? Was it the testimonial of the male client who claimed he was living in comfort and security following the unexpected death of his wife? Or was it that his sheer delight in the "gadget" had gotten him into a mellow mood—a mood on which Insurance Agent Talbot was quick to capitalize?

This reporter thinks that the latter, and the latter alone, is the reason why Ralph Hubert bought the insurance policy. The prosecuting attorney thought otherwise. He convinced the jury that he was right.

But let's go on to the next development in the case. No one was at all surprised when Ralph went into Worcester the next day and bought himself a tape recorder. He hurried home and disappeared into his workshop. At six o'clock Bessie stepped from the back door and called him to supper. Ralph failed to respond.

At eight o'clock Mrs. Hubert heard a cow bawling on their back porch. She was so startled that she dropped a dish that she was drying.

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In the next moment the bawling of the cow gave way to the cackling of hens and the crowing of a rooster. Then she heard the unmistakable grunting of a pig.

Bessie's mouth fell open. Slowly she started toward the door, not quite knowing what to expect when she opened it. With her hand on the knob she hesitated again, because now, just beyond the panel, a horse gave forth with a loud whinny.

Bessie snapped on the outside light and jerked open the door all in one motion. Her jaw became even more unhinged. There was Ralph sitting in a chair beside a small table on which he'd placed the tape recorder. Ralph's head was resting on the back of the chair, his eyes were closed and there was a contented smile on his face.

At the moment that Bessie appeared on the scene the recorder gave forth with the haunting, faraway cry of a whippoorwill. This was followed with the hooting of

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an owl that broke the silence. Bessie let the screen door slam shut. Ralph opened his eyes, leaned forward and switched the recorder to "rewind." Then, still without comment, he turned the button to "record." It was only then that he spoke.

"Like it?"

Bessie came out of her stupor. "W-what is it? It ain't a phonograph. No phonograph ever played a record like that."

"No, it ain't no phonograph," said Ralph. "It's a tape recorder."

"What in the land of Goshen is a tape recorder?"

"I'll show you," said Ralph.

He rewound the tape and turned the switch to "play." Bessie jumped. She took a backward step and her mouth fell open again. As clearly as though she and Ralph were repeating themselves she heard their voices carrying on the conversation of but a moment ago.

A look of incredulity and pleased astonishment came into Bessie's eyes. She plumped herself down into a chair and stared at the whirling reels. "Well, I declare to goodness!"

Ralph laughed and switched off the recorder.

Was this all part of Ralph Hubert's diabolical plan to murder his wife? It was indeed, Prosecuting Attorney Bryant had stated emphatically at the trial. He had gone on to prove his point. According to the testimony of neighbors there now followed a period in which the Huberts seemed to be living in complete harmony. No longer could Bessie's nagging voice be heard by the loiterers at the crossroads grocery. Also, at frequent intervals Ralph and Bessie were seen in town together and from all reports they were in perfect accord.

What was the reason for this sudden change in relationship? Could it be that Bessie was so fascinated and charmed by the tape recorder that she became more tolerant and less abusive? Could it be that Ralph surreptitiously recorded her nagging voice and then played it back to her, thus shaming her into a more passive attitude?

Both possibilities were brought out at the trial, but the one that really convinced the jury was that crafty Ralph had told Bessie that the tape recorder was an invention of his own and that he was actually receiving royalties from its sale.

That the Huberts' income was augmented became obvious to the townspeople. Within a month following the incident of the tape recorder they purchased a new automobile, a complete new wardrobe for Bessie, and had the farm buildings painted. Ralph also bought a clock radio. This was a master

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stroke. It fitted in neatly with the pattern for murder that Prosecutor Bryant began to make clearly evident at the trial.

Ralph's next move did cause a stir of wonder among the townspeople. He began making trips to Worcester twice a week. But instead of driving into the city in his brand new automobile, he went by bus! Moreover, he always left early in the morning and on every occasion he had the local taxi come out to the farm and drive him to the bus stop at the crossroads store. This was an extravagance of which no self respecting New Englander could approve unless . . .

Ralph provided the "unless." He let it be known that his twice weekly trips to Worcester were for the purpose of consulting with the commission house regarding his royalties on the tape recorder, and he also let drop the fact that the commissions were far in excess of what he had hoped.

Now, according to Prosecutor Bryant, the stage was set. Every possible hole in Ralph's master plan had been plugged. Every alibi had been cleverly set up. Or so he thought.

At six o'clock on the morning of May 2, 1950, Jud Anderson, the local taxi driver, arrived at the Hubert farm as usual. It was Saturday, the day on which Ralph made his second weekly trip to Worcester. Jud tooted his horn and waited. Now the pattern began to follow the prescribed course. The side door opened and Ralph stepped out. He hesitated, thrust his head back inside the door and called, "So long, honey."

Jud, waiting in his cab, heard this and heard Bessie's reply come from inside the house. "Have a nice trip, dear." Jud yawned. He had been seeing and listening to this routine for a couple of months now.

Ralph hurried to the cab and got in, muttering something about Bessie being spoiled and remaining in bed late since they had come into a bit of money. Jud testified to all this at the trial.

Prosecutor Bryant produced evidence that proved Ralph a fiend beyond the comprehension of Ashley's simple-minded residents. He proved that just before Ralph stuck his head back into the house to call his goodbyes to Bessie, he had flicked a light switch that turned on the tape recorder. It was all a matter of timing, practiced twice a week for the past two months. Bessie's answer coming from the tape recorder could not come a split second before Ralph's "so long, honey." It didn't.

Now the prosecutor proved that Bessie was already dead, or at least

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Ralph thought she was, when he made his exit. He had clubbed her over the head with a stove poker. Then to make doubly sure there would be no slip-up, he had bound and gagged her and caked her body with thermit.

Thermit is a mixture composed of finely divided aluminum and a metallic oxide. When ignited it will burn at a temperature up to 3000 degrees centigrade.

Ralph had ingeniously wired the tape recorder to the clock radio and the clock radio to his wife's thermit caked body. The recorder had reproduced Bessie's calling "goodbye" to Ralph, then had been shut off by the clock radio. Later in the day, at 10 a.m. to be exact, the radio had switched the recorder on again. It was at this time that Ben Beardsley, the local mail carrier, had stopped at the Huberts' mail box and left some advertising literature and a copy of the Weekly Gazette.

Beardsley testified at the trial that he had heard the sound of music coming from inside the Huberts' house and the unmistakable sound of Bessie singing and humming. When asked by the prosecutor if he made daily stops at the Huberts, Beardsley shook his head.

"'Bout twice a week. Rest of the time there ain't no mail to deliver."

"But you always stopped on Saturdays?" the prosecutor asked.

"Yep. That's right."

"Why?"

"Because that's the day I deliver the Weekly Gazette."

At the trial Ralph flatly denied that he had chosen to make one of his weekly trips to Worcester on Saturday because it was the only day he was one hundred percent positive that the mailman would stop. When asked to explain his activities in detail on the day of the "death" of his wife he told a glib, plausible, and as it turned out, an ingeniously simple story. He had been surprised and annoyed, he said, to find that the commission house that had been handling his royalties on the sale of the tape recorder, was closed. From what information he could glean from other occupants of the building where the commission people operated and from the police, the firm of Wrather and Cohill was a con outfit operating under a fictitious name. They had closed their doors and skipped, taking Ralph's latest royalty check with them.

This story, to which he stuck, precluded the possibility of anyone testifying at the trial that Ralph had not been receiving royalties.

Ralph also testified that he had tried several times to reach Bessie by phone in the late afternoon and early evening to tell her the sad news. The local telephone operator

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had corroborated Ralph's statement.

At 2 o'clock on Sunday morning Ralph disembarked at Ashley from a through bus from Boston to New York. This in itself was unusual. Such buses made stops only at major points such as Worcester, Springfield, Hartford. How had Ralph persuaded the driver to pause at Ashley? Why hadn't Ralph arrived, as usual, on the local bus that reached Ashley at 8 p.m.?

At the trial Ralph patiently explained that he had remained in Worcester because he was still trying to track down the commission people who had absconded with his funds.

The driver of the through bus was never found. He had quit his job the next day and disappeared. Coincidence? Or had Ralph bribed the man?

At any rate, according to Ralph's own testimony, he had walked the quarter mile from the crossroads store to his farm. When he was within a hundred yards of the place, the house had suddenly exploded into flames. He had stared in a state of near shock for a moment, then, without thought of making an effort to save Bessie from the inferno or without giving a thought to the livestock that was housed in the nearby barn and outbuildings, he had turned and raced to the nearest neighbor to spread the alarm. He stuck to this story. The payoff to all this is yet to come, but let's consider one more facet of the gruesome affair. The defense. What of the defense? Who were the other suspects, if any? In the face of such damning evidence, what could a defense attorney come up with that would make him worth his salt?

Asa Corrigan, the defense attorney, came up with a couple of goodies that momentarily—but only momentarily—tilted the scales in Ralph's favor. If, he demanded in stentorian tones, the commission house that was paying his client royalties didn't exist, as his worthy opponent seemed to think, from what source was Hubert getting the money with which to lavish gifts on his wife?

Prosecutor Bryant had a fast answer for that one. He trotted out a witness named Jonas Henderson, a reasonably prosperous Ashley farmer. Henderson testified that he had purchased a one-third interest in Ralph's invention for $5,000. He had the papers to prove it. He further testified that he had agreed to make no mention of the transaction because Ralph had asked him not to and he knew the tongue-lashing his friend would undergo from Bessie if she knew about it.

Defense Attorney Corrigan's second "goodie" was a real shocker.

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He proved that on the Tuesdays and Saturdays that Ralph spent in Worcester, Bessie was never at home. This fact was testified to by neighbors who, for one reason or another, had either tried to call Bessie on the phone or attempted to visit her.

Where then was Bessie? The defense attorney proved where she was. He produced a witness named Sid Avery, the proprietor of a local gas station. It developed that Bessie and Sid had become enamored of each other during the many times she and Ralph had stopped at his station. Bessie, arrayed in the new wardrobe that Ralph had bought for her, had spread her wings, so to speak. When Sid had called her on the phone on one of the days Ralph had been in Worcester, she had agreed to meet him at a secret rendezvous. They had been holding clandestine meetings on Tuesdays and Saturdays ever since.

Defense Attorney Corrigan had been waiting for that one. He offered in evidence a section of magnetic tape and a book. The tape, when played, proved to be a recording of Sid's and Bessie's voices during one of their clandestine sessions, and it should be mentioned that the dialogue brought scarlet blushes to more than one listener's face.

The playing of the tape had a triple impact. First, it gave Ralph a motive for murder. Second, it proved, in part, his whereabouts on the Tuesdays and Saturdays that he claimed to be in Worcester. And third—and most important—it established Sid Avery as a prime suspect. At one point during the playing of the tape Sid's voice came out clear and sharp saying, "If only we could get rid of Ralph—" The remainder of the sentence was apparently lost in an amorous embrace.

Under questioning, Ralph admitted that he had suspected Bessie and Sid of having an affair. He admitted that on one of the days he was supposed to be in Worcester he had remained in Ashley, waited until Bessie had left the farm and followed her to a deserted shack in the woods, where she had met Avery. On another such occasion he had rigged his tape recorder so that it would operate on a battery, and crept close enough to record the dialogue between the two.

What had been his purpose? What had he intended to do once he had recorded the voices? Ralph spread his hands. He hadn't decided.

The prosecution relentlessly pursued his line of questioning. So far Ralph had accounted for only two of the days he claimed to be in Worcester. Where was he on the

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other days? Ralph and the prosecution reached an impasse on that one. Ralph stubbornly insisted that he was at the commission house, and the prosecution had just as stubbornly insisted that the commission house didn't exist.

In the event that the prosecution was right, it can only be assumed that Ralph must have spent his time wandering the streets of Worcester, or some other nearby city, secure in the knowledge that Bessie and everyone else in Ashley believed him to be conducting his business with the commission house.

The book that Attorney Corrigan offered in evidence was a dictionary, apparently recently purchased, but with the page containing the word "thermit" dog-eared. Corrigan had obtained a search warrant and found the dictionary in the boarding house room where Sid lived.

Prosecutor Bryant blistered under that one for a couple of days, but he finally came up with an answer. He pictured Sid Avery as an enterprising young man, a young man with ambition and, like Ralph Hubert, with an inventive turn of mind. At present, during his idle moments at the filling station, he was working on an improved type of thermopile, a battery. The word "therm" and all of its derivatives appeared on the same page as "thermit."

To be sure, Sid had purchased a dictionary. He had also purchased a half dozen other reference books to aid him in his endeavor. Bryant not only had the books to prove it, but he had a dozen crude drawings that Sid had made.

Ralph Hubert was arrested the day following the fire and accused of the fiendish murder of his wife. Bessie's body had been found lying in a foot of water in the cellar of the farmhouse. She was still bound and gagged. An autopsy revealed that death was due to drowning. The fact that the ropes with which she had been tied had not been disturbed indicated that she had made no effort to free herself which, in turn, indicated that she had never regained consciousness.

The water in the cellar was the seepage from Waunick Lake. Ralph had never gotten around to correcting the condition during the dry season.

Ralph had underestimated the intense heat which thermit generated. Within minutes after the fire had started the floor burned through and Bessie's body, now a blazing torch, had fallen through to the cellar, where the blaze was extinguished.

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The tape recorder, clock radio, kitchen stove and some other furnishings met a similar fate. The partially burned recorder and a section of tape were recovered.

Prosecutor Bryant startled the court room audience by playing two sections of the recovered tape. On the first Bessie's voice came out loud and clear saying: "Good bye, dear. Have a nice trip." When the second section was played her voice was heard singing and humming snatches of an unrecognizable song.

Defense Attorney Corrigan had a comeback. If the defendant, he stated, had gone to all that trouble to commit the perfect crime he certainly would have remained in Worcester, away from the scene, until the deed had been accomplished.

But Prosecutor Bryant had an answer for that one too. With triumphant dramatics he pointed out that Ralph had believed that he *was* staying away from the scene while the deed was being accomplished. On May 2, 1950, Massachusetts had gone on daylight saving time. Ralph had forgotten this and neglected to set the clock radio ahead. A regrettable oversight on his part.

But you can still get an argument most anywhere in Ashley about Ralph's guilt or innocence. Wasn't most of the evidence circumstantial? Wasn't it conceivable that Ralph and Bessie had conspired to record her goodbyes in a pixie effort to fool Mailman Beardsley? Isn't it possible that Beardsley had actually heard Bessie's live voice? And what about Sid Avery?

Anyone could say what he wanted, but the folks in Ashley who had known Sid since he was knee high to a stunted duck couldn't conceive of him spending his idle moments trying to improve a battery that didn't need improving. He was the type of man who would be more apt to spend his idle moments chasing after comely young women like Bessie Hubert.

The court records are available if you want to examine them. They state coldly and cryptically that Ralph Hubert was accused of murdering his wife, Bessie; was convicted, sentenced and executed.

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FLORA

She bought the little plant because it reminded her of spring. Since the month was January, it was important to Mrs. Craig to be reminded of spring.

"What is it called?" she asked the nice young man in the florist's shop. Mrs. Craig had never been a gardener, (Henry had always tended the roses) felt a kind of awe towards those who could plant a seed and make it grow.

"It's an African Violet, ma'am. We have a fine selection." He directed her attention to a mass of greens and purples, standing leaf to leaf, flower to flower on a long, low table. "Any color, almost, that you might fancy."

Mrs. Craig put out a gloved finger, tentatively touched the dark leaves of the plant on the counter. "This one," she said, "is pink. I've always been fond of pink." The leaves, such a deep shade of green, stood out around the pot on rubber-like arms. Each reaching leaf had a furry look, as though it wore a cashmere sleeve, was somehow translucent. A thick outer coating, it seemed to Mrs. Craig, protecting a tender inside. The lovely pink-petalled flowerettes stood upright, swayed in the breeze as someone somewhere shut a door. "Are they hard to care for?"

The young man smiled. Mrs. Craig thought that he really was a most polite young man. "Not at all," he said. "There are a few little tricks. They need light, but not too much light. And you'll notice that the pot is set in a liner. You water from the bottom, from inside the liner, and use warm water. You water every three or four days, whenever the liner is dry. And, about every six weeks, give it a taste of . . ." he produced a bottle of dark blue liquid from behind the cash register, ". . . this." The label read 'African Violet Plant Food'.

Mrs. Craig bought the violet and the violet food and took it home.

Not home, she amended, as she unlocked the apartment door. Home had been the house that had been sold while she was in the hospital. "That big old house was just too much for you, Mother," her daughter Evelyn had said. "We're going to get you a nice little apartment where you won't have any responsibilities."

She carefully set the African violet down on an end table and took off her gloves. She had to admit it *was* a nice little apartment. Nice.

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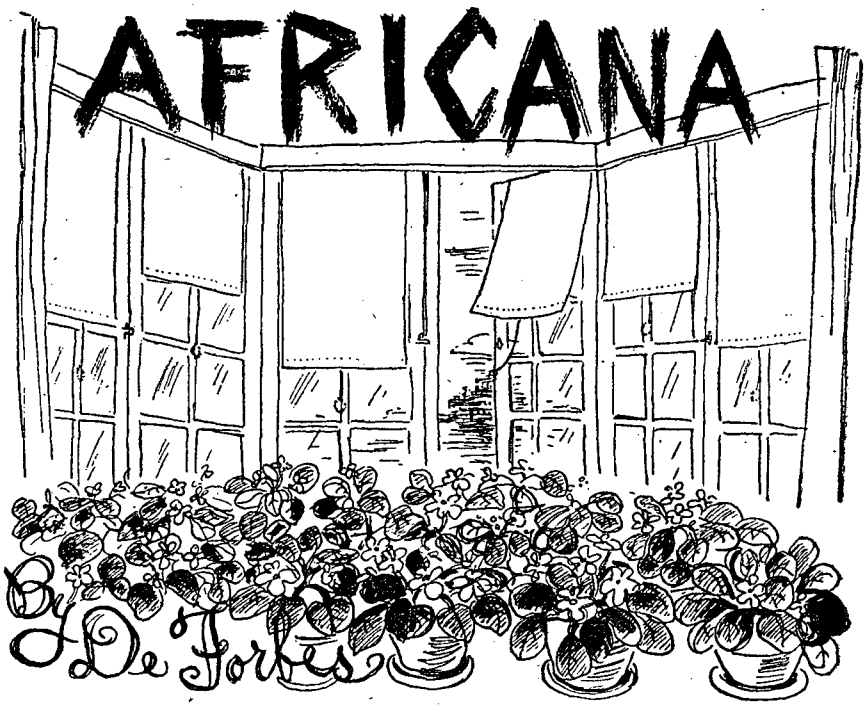

Its inoffensive neutrality was designed to appeal to general taste. Pale beige walls, pale green slip covers, pale drapes, pale ceilings, pale floors. Lately Mrs. Craig had the feeling that the rooms (little! oh, yes, indeed!) were fading into complete neutrality, taking her with them.

But now, the plant—the sturdy, yet fragile-looking little plant—struck a positive note in this monotonous symphony.

"You're very nice," said Mrs. Craig to the African violet. "I hope you like it here." She went out into the kitchen—everything in the kitchen was yellow, like an

Africa has been called the most fascinating of all the continents. Could it be that even the violets of Africa exert that peculiar pull on the imagination which we call fascination?

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egg yolk turned bad, Mrs. Craig thought. She preferred white kitchens, big white kitchens with touches of bright red and green, remembering her own old kitchen. She turned on the faucet briskly, ran water into the tea kettle. She told herself, and firmly, too, what's done is done and there's no sense in complaining.

She made her cup of tea and took it in the living room and drank it, sitting near the African violet.

The next day was Sunday and Evelyn and John brought the children to visit. There was something about being with her family that tired her, Mrs. Craig decided. They were so big—even the little ones, big for their ages. Even Evelyn, slim as she was, was a tall girl, and so vital. They all laughed so much and talked so loud. If the children cried, which they seemed to do at regular intervals, they cried more loudly than Mrs. Craig ever remembered children crying.

"Have you had a good week, Mother?" Mrs. Craig's daughter, as both Mrs. Craig and Evelyn herself had often been told, was a real beauty. Mrs. Craig looked at her now, hardly hearing the question, so intent was she on seeing how her daughter looked, really seeing it—this thing that made her beautiful.

After three children (John III, Fredricka, and Antoinette) Evelyn's figure was as svelte as ever. Her chestnut hair was as wavy, as lustrous at thirty-three as it had been at twenty. Her face was as unlined, her dark eyes as brilliant. Yes, it was still, would always be, Mrs. Craig supposed, a pleasure to look at Evelyn. So that was beauty.

"I said—what kind of a week did you have?" Evelyn raised her voice a few more decibels, as though I were deaf, thought Mrs. Craig with annoyance.

Mrs. Craig searched her mind for small details that Evelyn might like to hear. "I had lunch on Tuesday," she said, "with Milly Crockett." Mrs. Craig stopped in the middle of her narration, cast an anxious eye on the children who were now involved in a wrestling match. They were, Mrs. Craig thought, perilously near the table that held the African violet. I shall have to find a better place for it, she told herself.

"That's nice," said Evelyn. "Where did you eat?"

"Hey! You Indians." John Trent had been a star halfback at college, loomed large when he rose to separate the young wrestlers. "You're making your grandmother nervous. Cut it out."

Evelyn stood up. "They're getting restless," she said. "I suppose

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we'd better take them home." She reached out, took her mother's hands. "You're sure you're feeling all right?"

Mrs. Craig smiled up at her. "Of course I am."

The beautiful face frowned. "I don't know, John. She still looks so—so sort of peaked."

Mrs. Craig's son-in-law bent over her from his tall height, peered into her face. "You're all right, aren't you, Mom?" He asked without waiting for, perhaps without expecting an answer. "It's just the operation, Evie." Mrs. Craig still winced inwardly whenever she heard her lovely daughter called 'Evie'. Just as she did when the children were referred to as 'Jack', 'Freddie', and 'Tony'. Mrs. Craig loved nice names. "It was a major job, honey," John was going on. "It takes time to get over it."

Evelyn smiled, reassured. "Of course. A few months of this lovely peace and quiet will make you a new woman, Mother." And then they were all busy putting innumerable snow suits, mittens, hats and boots on innumerable children and it wasn't until long after they had gone, and the echoes of their being there had died away, that Mrs. Craig realized they hadn't even noticed her African violet.

That night she gave it a name. She called it 'Tamara'.

Bright and early Monday morning, Mrs. Craig bought two more African violets, one white and one dark lavender. She brought them back to the apartment, arranged the trio in the sunniest window. The white one she named 'Blanche' and the dark one she called 'Liliom'. It took her quite a while to select the right names. She spent the rest of the morning arranging and rearranging them, then sitting back to enjoy their beauty.

Imagine! Violets in Africa!

She had wanted a pet when she'd learned about the apartment. Her house sold, her furniture in storage, (Honestly, Mother, it isn't worth moving. The pieces are so big and heavy—they'd crowd you right out of an apartment) she'd felt quite acutely the need for companionship. If only Ebenezer were still with her. Ebenezer who had come to live with her and Henry when he was just a kitten. But they'd had to put Ebenezer to rest when she'd become so ill—unable to care for him. It hurt—still hurt—to think of it. So she wouldn't. She wouldn't even hint that the hurt was still with her. She'd be matter-of-fact. She'd simply point out that she needed—someone—something alive.

"A puppy—or a cat?" Despite her resolution, she'd broached the subject timidly to Evelyn. Evelyn

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had never been what she'd call an animal lover.

"But, Mother, you can't!" Evelyn's fine brows climbed up her noble forehead. "You know how attached you get to animals—and besides, the apartment house won't take pets."

"Not even a canary?" Mrs. Craig had asked wistfully.

"Now, Mom," John had stepped in close to the hospital bed, put out a comforting hand, "you know any kind of animal or bird requires a good deal of care. Why, this apartment we've found for you even has maid service. We don't want you to have to do a thing."

"And remember, Mother," Evelyn had added, "a pet ties you down. We want you to be free," she made a gesture with her expressive hands, "free as the breeze."

And now Mrs. Craig was glad. She didn't need an animal or a bird. She'd found something much better. Her African violets.

On Tuesday it seemed to her that Tamara had grown a bit. But Blanche—she wasn't sure of this—looked a wee bit less hearty, her leaves a little tired, a little pale. She studied the water depth in the liners, decided they might need a little plant food. After all, she concluded, they had suffered a sort of shock. They had been moved from their home (not a big house with white curtains, true, but the florist's shop) to this apartment. She read the directions carefully, prepared the mixture and filled the little cups.

At noon when the sun was the brightest, when its rays cut in through the window and caused a glare, she carefully lowered the shades, raised them again, after trial and error, at three when the sun had moved away. The windows were in a sort of bay, looked down on a small enclosed area, the apartment house's excuse for a yard. Now in winter a few scraggly evergreens stood bravely, knee deep in snow. Everything here was so ugly, so ugly. Except for the violets.

On Wednesday she bought Dolores and Andrea. Dolores was just a shade lighter than Liliom and Andrea was a smidgeon darker than Tamara. That was the day she had a luncheon engagement with Vera Hogarth. Mrs. Craig called and cancelled it, said she had a headache. The truth of the matter was, she didn't dare go out. She would have had to leave the apartment shortly after eleven, and—remembering Vera's long-windedness and her penchant for shopping trips—she probably wouldn't have been back before five. Mrs. Craig knew she couldn't pull the

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curtains and take the sun from her charges from eleven to five—they would starve for sunlight—and, conversely, she couldn't leave the shades up. The nice young man at the florist shop had told her they needed filtered sunlight at noon. So—she'd called and cancelled.

Mrs. Craig cooked herself an omelet and brought it into the living room. "Africa," she said. "Do you come from Africa? You must —because of your family name. Tell me—I've never been anywhere —what is it like in Africa?"

And she sat in the semi-gloom and let her omelet grow cold while she heard wonderful stories of jungles of primeval green and striped black and white zebras and tawny lions and smoke-grey elephants and small jewelled snakes and . . .

The phone rang.

"Mother, are you all right?"

"Yes, Evelyn. Of course I'm all right."

"Mrs. Hogarth called. She was quite upset." Evelyn's voice took on an edge. "In fact, I guess you could say she lit into me."

"Lit into you?" repeated Mrs. Craig. "Whatever for?"

"Oh—you know Mrs. Hogarth. She believes in speaking her mind. According to her I am the worst sort of ungrateful child. She said I had no business installing you in that apartment all by yourself . . ." her daughter's voice broke. "You are all right, aren't you? You are happy there?"

Mrs. Craig's answer was sure. "Of course I am."

She could hear Evelyn's sigh of relief. "Honestly, Mother, you don't know how I've worried about it. We wanted to have you with us, of course. But the house isn't big enough in the first place and besides, in a ranch-type there's absolutely no place to get away from one another . . ." She stopped, began again. "Well, John and I thought the children would just drive you mad, and the doctor warned us . . ." she hesitated, carefully chose her words, "the doctor said that your operation might cause some psychological repercussions, after all a hysterectomy is a serious thing . . ."

"Evelyn." Mrs. Craig cut her short.

"Yes, Mother." Funny, just then she sounded like the little girl Evelyn with the long curls and the sunny disposition.

"I'm fine. You did the right thing. Don't worry."

As soon as she could, she left the telephone, but the violets were napping in the diffused light and Mrs. Craig couldn't go back to Africa. Not right then.

So instead she went back to

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when Evelyn was little and Mr. Craig—dear Henry—was still alive and they were together in the big house with its high ceilings and wide, ruffled-curtained windows. How happy they had been—the years had flown and then, before she knew it Evelyn was married and Henry was gone and there was nothing, nothing to give her any pleasure but going back.

Going back. There—she was doing it again and that nice young doctor had told her to look ahead. "Make a new life," he had said.

Well, she was. She was making a new life, following orders. But they didn't plan on this, Mrs. Craig told her friends on the sill. They didn't plan on Mrs. Craig's traveling to Africa.

On Thursday and Friday she shopped. She bought a special stand to hold her plants, a stand with glass shelves so that it wouldn't matter if the water leaked a little, and she also bought Virginia, Helene, Eloise, Gloriana and Melisande. She would have bought more, but the nice young man at the florist's shop opened her eyes to yet another world.

"I don't want to seem impertinent," he said, "but you are awfully keen on the Africans and I wondered if you knew how easily they reproduce."

"Reproduce?"

"African violets reproduce asexually. That is, a leaf from an African, planted in the right sort of soil, will produce another African."

Mrs. Craig stared in wonder at Gloriana—she had just named her—in her hand.

"You mean," she said, "I can grow my own?"

"Yes, ma'am. A whole forest of them if you want to." The young man produced a plastic bag of potting soil and a series of small pots with little holes in the bottom, even a bag of pebbles. He showed her exactly how to pinch the leaf, to put a few pebbles in the pot for drainage, how to mulch the potting soil.

By Saturday evening Mrs. Craig had started a leaf from each of her friends—her children?—she was tired, confused. Possibly she had tried to do too much all at once.

But she was done now and proud of her work. The neat little rows of babies . . . how wonderful it would be when they too were grown and full of flower, to then have their own babies, and go on and on forever. While Mrs. Craig sat by and watched. No—not only watched. This was the important thing. They needed her—needed her to feed them and water them, to keep them alive.

It had been so long since she

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had been needed. Not since dear Henry was alive. And then the operation, the horrible operation that had left her a shell of a woman —an empty, useless creature. How foolish she was being. She must stop this feeling sorry for herself. And besides—it wasn't true anymore.

Virginia?—yes, Virginia and Dolores were beckoning to her, whispering, but she was so tired, so tired, she would just take a little nap right there in the chair and in the morning she'd be fresh and ready to go . . .

Pyramids and the Sphinx and the longnecked ones—the giraffes and the ostriches—and diamond mines, yes, diamond mines that sparkled in the morning sun.

The buzzer from the foyer brought her back. She'd ignored it at first . . . where was she? What day? (The sun was shining.) What time, what did it matter? . . . but the buzzer was so insistent that she excused herself and attended to it.

"Mother! You were so long in answering. We've come for our Sunday visit."

Mrs. Craig looked into the blackness of the speaking tube.

"Whom did you wish to see?" she asked.

"Mother. John, she sounds so funny . . . Mother—it *is* you, isn't it? You sound so far away. Mother, this is Evelyn. John and the children are with me. Mother . . ."

"You must have the wrong apartment," said Mrs. Craig kindly. "I'm leaving today. I'm taking a trip to Africa with a large group, my children, my friends. I hope you find your mother."

As she came back to them, those who eagerly awaited, she took time to bolt the door.

"Now," said Mrs. Craig over the far-off noise of the buzzer. She sat on the sill beside them and down below the snow seemed to melt before her eyes and instead she looked down on a lush tangle of green, green, green . . . dark-skinned Basuto girls and tall, strong Zulu warriors, child-sized pigmies and king-size Balubas, the Nile and the desert and the jungle, the land, the sky, the water, and she moved smoothly toward it, through it all, going with them (naturally they led the way) deeper and deeper and deeper into the thick, dark green.

"I tell you—something is wrong with my mother." Mrs. Craig's daughter let her apprehension make her voice shrill. "You must let us in the apartment."

The manager frowned, reached for his keys. He had managed apartments for many years—he was sure of his ability to size up a

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prospective tenant. Mrs. Craig, unlike some he could mention, that couple in 3 B, for instance; he had labeled 'no trouble, no trouble at all'. And now—if she were ill, or had met with an accident . . . he sighed inwardly and led the way to the elevator. The daughter and her husband and their three noisy children followed.

The manager rapped on Mrs. Craig's door. First he rapped easily, politely, and then more loudly, urgently.

The daughter said sharply, "Do you hear anything?"

"Open the door, man," said the son-in-law. His tone was carefully unemotional. "Now don't worry, Evie. She's probably taking a nap."

"Do you hear anything?" the daughter asked again. Her voice had risen and the manager put the key in the lock and turned it.

The door gave a little. The chain lock held it, allowed them a two-inch view of neutral carpet, walls.

"Where's Grandma?" asked the little girl. "Momma, where's Grandma?"

The older boy tugged roughly at her curls. "Shut up, Tony." The smaller boy jostled him. "Let my sister alone."

"John . . ." the daughter's face was ashen. "Something's terribly wrong." She whispered the words.

Her husband moved back, ready to rush at the door. "Just a minute," said the manager, "if you break the chain lock, you'll splinter the door. Who's going to . . . ?"

"Hurry, John. We've got to get in!"

"We'll pay for any damages," said the son-in-law and he hurled himself against the panel. They heard the tearing of wood, the rattling of chain as it fell against the jamb and the door was open now, wide open.

"Mother!"

The room was empty. The daughter and her husband glanced at each other. "Wait here," he said and walked briskly across to the kitchen. She clutched the shoulders of the biggest boy, called the other children to her with a low word.

The son-in-law came out of the kitchen, the door swinging wildly behind him. He didn't look at them, turned into the bathroom. The manager looked idly around, was pleased to see the apartment looked neat, clean, well cared for.

Trent reappeared, his big square face expressionless. Mrs. Trent stepped toward him. "What—is she . . . ?"

He made a hopeless gesture with his hands.

"Oh, no," said the daughter. She began to cry. Like a child, she began to cry in shuddering sobs.

"No." John Trent spoke quickly,

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harshly. "She isn't . . . that is, she isn't here."

The manager swung around to face him. Mrs. Trent stopped her weeping, stared at him with open mouth as though caught in the formation of a new wail.

"Isn't here?" asked the manager. "But—the chain lock?"

"Isn't here?" echoed the daughter.

"Where is Grandma?" The little girl was crying now, absorbing her parents' emotions. The smallest boy joined her in ear-splitting chorus.

"It's impossible," said Mrs. Craig's daughter. She started for the kitchen. "She's fallen somewhere—or shut in somewhere—try the closets—the fire escape."

They all moved in different directions, calling, searching, opening, shutting doors.

The manager stood, keys dangling from his hand. The room was hot, he thought, very hot, even though the shades in the bay were drawn. It was, oddly enough, an almost tropical heat.

And all those plants—massed at the windows in the bay. What were they? Oh, yes. African violets. He had never seen so many, and never seen them so large. Huge, green clumps of them, their pink and white and purple blooms waving at the end of slender stems as though they trembled. Air current, he supposed, and yet, it was . . . yes, almost like a jungle.

He moved toward them, realized suddenly that the center window was open. Wide open behind its shade and yet, in here, it was so still, so hot. He came closer, mentally denying a sudden surge of apprehension.

He heard the sound as he came and it puzzled and surprised him. He thought one of the children might be making it until he understood—those tenants in 3 B, just underneath, had their television tuned too loud again. And after he'd warned them repeatedly . . .

For some strange reason he always remembered that he clearly heard the harsh beat of native drums—just before he looked down.

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My trouble is, I guess, that I'm too intelligent—and too sensitive—for my recent profession: gunsel. A gunsel, for the uninformed, is a modern, laundered and big-city version of a gunslinger.

For this calling you do not need an I. Q., and you certainly don't need feelings. Unfortunately, I have both.

I am first irked when my brother-in-law Tocky gets me an assignment to blast a no-goodnik in Quebec, Canada, and tells me I got to make the trip from little old N.Y. by bus, no less, to be inconspicuous. You know how long it takes to get to Montreal, even, by bus? Twelve hours. And then who knows what connections I make there for Quebec?

I do not utter a peep to Tocky, however, for he has been very good to me in the past. Matter of fact, this is my third and last chance as a gunsel because I goof the first two times, through circumstances beyond my control.

On my first job, to Detroit—which is a pretty good deal because I fly by plane—I am a little nervous and I wing the wrong guy. Not seriously. But seriously enough so I have to lam out of town without waiting for another set-up.

On my second, to Miami, Fla., by train—I get winged in the shoulder by the mark's bodyguard.

So it takes quite a bit of fast talking by Tocky to get me another chance. Thus I cannot squawk about the bus deal.

Also, Tocky does me previous favors which, somehow, always backfire.

The first time, at the behest of my sister, Big Red, Tocky sets me up in back of a horse room with 15 slot-machines. Well, do you know, the very first few hours every one of these so-called one-arm bandits gives nothing but jackpots. I do not know if it was sabotage, a mechanical phenomena, or just a cruel jest of Fate, but anyway Tocky is out a lot of moola and I am out of gainful employment again before you can say Jack Robberson.

The next time, he sets me up as a book and, the first two days, my bettors get more winners than

Maladjustment, freely translated, means an inability to adjust oneself to circumstances. Then change the circumstances, one would say. Easier said than done, you know.

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if they are Arnold Rothsteins. Once more Tocky takes a clouting and I am drummed out of the field of gambling.

So, as I say, I cannot beef about the bus to Quebec. But I do not have to like it. Therefore, before stepping aboard at 7 p.m.—and although I am not a juicehead—I stash two pints of rye in my suitcase to brighten the monotony of the trip.

As we pull out, I case my fellow passengers and see nothing very promising in the way of fun and games. The only pretty chick on the bus is five seats back and sitting with a Marine Sergeant boasting a jaw like Boulder Dam. On the debit side there are three old French dolls who do not converse below a yell. Also a nine, ten year old kid who keeps running up and down the aisle with a giant container of milk which I am sure he is going to spill on my head.

Lucky for the kid and his loved ones, he does not, but the worry is there.

It is dark early on the highway and I look out at the assembly-line of signs of pizzerias, gaseterias, supermarkets and such and soon I am numb from neon. At this point I break out the first bottle of rye and space myself at two healthy gulps every 15 minutes. On the second bottle I do not bother with the spacing and the next thing I know we are at the Canadian border, where a very pleasant guy in uniform asks us a few questions like how long do we stay in Canada, etc., and requests identification (I show him a Social Security Card).

Then we get out and our luggage is inspected. It is all quite cordial and courteous, though I suspect they are not so nice to me if they know I got my piece taped to the calf of my right leg.

Soon we are on the road again and I go into a fitful slumber 'till we reach Montreal. It is a gray and dreary a.m. and I feel rumpled and stubbly but I decide to push on to Quebec when I learn there is a bus in an hour or so. This gives me time to get coffee, which does not make me feel any better. So I also go to what they call a "taverne", which is a no-dames-allowed saloon where you drink at little tables and everybody seems to order three or four beers (bières) at a time. When in Rome, you know, so I order four, and when I get on the bus I am feeling even crummier than before.

It turns out that the Flexible Flyer I am on goes by way of Trois-Rivieres; (which means Three Rivers) and it seems to hit every hamlet in Canada, so to get my mind off the trip I start think-

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ing about the character I am supposed to hit. He is to be set up on a corner of Rue Daulac, which I am told is an undistinguished little street off the railroad in the Lower Town of Quebec. (I figure to distinguish it by making it the scene of a rub-out.) Zero hour is 1 a.m. the next morning, a good time because, they tell me, the tavernes close at midnight and the cafes at 2 a.m.

The target's name is Danny (The Louse) Delisle and he is an operator in the big H, who has been getting too big for his sabots. I do not feel any compunction about putting the blast on him because, in my book, there are some things it is all right to traffic in—like vice and honest crime—but dope is not one of them. Also, I hear, this guy is a mean one, and he has no family, so who cares? (Sometimes I wonder if I miss that guy in Detroit because I hear he has a wife and daughter and subconsciously I want to miss him, as I am that kind of soft-hearted schmoe. The human mind is an interesting thing all right.)

By this time I am real pooped and my brain is foggy as I look out at the pastoral landscape. I notice that the driver is slowing the bus and I see an old guy shuffling along a dirt road that leads to the main highway. The driver stops and I realize he is waiting to pick up the old character. I look at the name of the joint, check my timetable, see we are six minutes behind schedule, and I am burned. Six minutes is not that important in my life, but I am tired and want to get to bed, and why couldn't that old jerk get out on the road when the bus was due?

We stall around another five minutes 'till he climbs aboard and I eye him with annoyance. He is sporting his Sunday suit with wide lapels that go out years ago and a fedora that looks like it never comes off the block, because of no crease in the top of the crown. Also, he does not seem abashed he keeps us all waiting. Looking back now, I realize it is a dopey impulse, but at the time I think of putting a slug in him. Luckily, even in my weary state, I realize that this will cause a to-do among the passengers—and that if I plug the driver I am left without transportation—so I just mutter and glower and try to go back to sleep.

My uneasy slumber is interrupted when I feel a sudden heavy pressure on my right thigh. I open my eyes blearily and see that a beefy, blank-faced young hick has plumped into the seat beside me and is taking up more than half the space. My first inclination is to chop my elbow into his yap

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but then I realize here is a diversion for a few miles. I sit perfectly still, close my eyes, and imagine how surprised he is if I suddenly jab a nail file into his fat hip. I toy with this fancy for a while but soon tire of it and fall back to sleep.

I am awakened by being nudged in the ribs and I am about to clobber my seat-mate, but he is pointing through the window to where a truck has gone off the road and is overturned in a field. He just wants me to share the sight and I think this is pretty hospitable to a stranger in a foreign country. Well, you know how an accident breaks the ice with people and soon we are talking haltingly (his English and my French are equally great) and he turns out to be a nice, if somewhat stupid, guy.

We make small—very small—talk about the weather, the trip, where he's from and where I'm from, mostly in monosyllables and with much nodding and smiling. I give him an American cigarette and he gives me a Canadian cigarette. It is pretty dull, but at least it helps pass the time. Then we seem to have exhausted each other's vocabularies and we are riding in silence for a couple miles.

On a sudden screwball impulse, I decide to have some fun with him, just to liven up the journey. I fix him with a hard stare and say in a low voice: "Moi go Quebec."

He smiles and nods. "Ah, Kaybec." (They pronounce it Kaybec up there, for some reason.)

"You know why?" I say, without smiling.

"M'sieu?"

"Pourquoi moi go Quebec?" I say.

"Pourquoi?" He shrugs.

I look very sinister and say: "To put the blast on a guy."

He shrugs again, not getting it at all, and I am warming up to the by-play.

"Comprez—man?" I ask.

"Ah, man, oui. Homme."

"Yeah, homme. Comprez shoot?"

"Non."

"Plug?"

"Non, M'sieu."

"Comprez boom-boom? Bang-bang?"

He looks at me like I am a prize kook, so I see I must resort to pantomime. I hold my right hand like a gun, with the forefinger out and the thumb up. Then I say: "Moi boom-boom homme in Quebec."

His mouth drops open in comprehension and he inhales slowly and audibly. His eyes are troubled as he says: "Ahh, M'sieu, pourquoi?"

"For three-and-a-half and ex-

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penses." That doesn't register, so I add: "Dough . . . moola . . . cash." Nothing. I go on: "Cabbage . . . the long green . . . gelt . . . money." Money does it.

"Ah, l'argent," he says.

Well, any old ex-GI from the ETO remembers certain key terms like "voulez-vous" and "combien" and "l'argent," so I dig him, too.

"Yeah, l'argent," I tell him.

"La, la, la, la," he says, shaking his head.

He looks scared and I am a little sorry for him.

"Don't worry," I say, "he very bad homme."

He still looks scared, so I pat his knee reassuringly and add: "You good homme."

He nods, a little pale, and I reflect on the power of the spoken word. You mention to a complete stranger you are going to put the heat on a guy and you are a big man.

There is no question of his crowding me now. He is sitting at a respectful distance, so far over on the seat that if the bus runs over a pebble he is jounced into the aisle. I realize he is too shook up for more conversation, so I resume looking out the window and watching the landscape blur by.

I have practically forgotten all about M'sieu Hick 'till we pull into another whistle-stop and he gets up and takes his beat-up suitcase from the baggage-rack above the seats.

I look up at him, wink, and wave a cheery goodbye to show him I am a good guy at heart. He smiles nervously and lumbers down the aisle. The last I see of him he is being embraced by an old lady in a black dress at the side of the road.

Well, I think, there is one hayseed that has a more interesting bus ride than usual. Now, back to the old wheat patch.

I drowse again and the next thing I know we are in Quebec, approaching the Gare Centrale (that's the main bus terminal). As we turn into a ramp I see a sign that says something like "ne stationez pas aucun temps"—which I deduce means "no parking at any time". I do not realize that this applies personally to me, but, minutes later, to my dismay, as we roll to a stop I see guys in uniform all around the bus. From their demeanor I know they are not mailmen.

It is a creep play for me to reach for my piece, so I just stay in my seat. But two of the cops outside my window start beckoning me to come off with my hands up, so there is nothing to do but concur.

I march off, hands up and feeling pretty foolish, and am immediately so surrounded by cops it is

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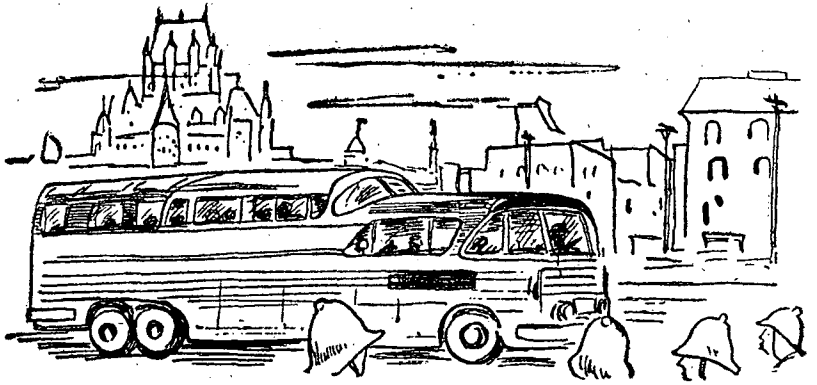

like I never left home. They frisk me and quickly locate the piece. Another gendarme gets my suitcase, which, fortunately, does not contain any implicating evidence.

They whisk me off in an official car to an imposing edifice full of Gothic and fallen arches and I am interrogated, with the help of an interpreter. Of course I deny everything, both in perfect English and broken French. If it comes to a showdown it is just the hick's word against mine.

There is just the little matter of the gun. But what can they do to me? Deport me? Big deal. Who needs maple leaves?

My big worry is that Tocky will be disappointed, to say the minimum. But who thinks a hayseed puts the finger on me for a random remark made just to get a rise out of him and jazz up a long trip, especially as I make it clear I have no beef with him? I am not sure Tocky sees it in this reasonable light, however.

Well, frankly, I am sick of being a gunsel anyway. Maybe when I get back to the states I'll get me a nice con game where violence is not necessary and intelligence and sensitivity are appreciated. The world is full of things to do if you use your old gray matter. And if you do not have to take long bus rides that bug you.

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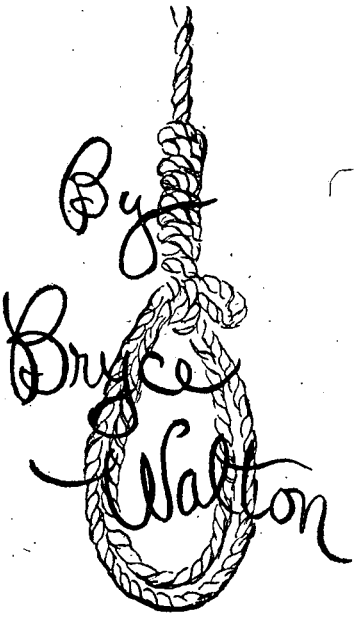
THE PERSPIRING prosecutor loosened his tie and continued his summation. His voice rose and fell like an old fashioned Shakespearean ham actor's.

"I only ask you to bear in mind that this creature Burke is on trial charged with the most brutal rape-murder ever committed in this county, and certainly the most brutal it has ever been my duty to present to a jury. Now I'm not going to keep you much longer . . ."

Burke's skin itched. The little courtroom, sweltering and airless in the July heat, had taken on the unreal blur of something experienced in a nightmare, or seen through the walls of an aquarium. He knew now that he would hang.

The prosecutor had presented him as a ravening beast. The old Judge, who actually wore red galluses, hunched behind his bench like a giant kangaroo. A local cracker named Pop Lemoyne had been appointed his lawyer, but whatever interest Pop had been able to work up was lost when his client refused to plead guilty



and throw himself on the mercy of the court.

"Why not throw me into a cage of lions?" Burke had asked. "Anyway, I never killed anyone."

"So?" Pop said. "They got swearing witnesses and circumstantial evidence. That poor girl was local and loved. You're an outsider and they got to hang somebody. Only chance you got is

Care and caution should be exercised when accepting what seems to be a sporting offer, lest the odds prove greater than those of which you are already aware.

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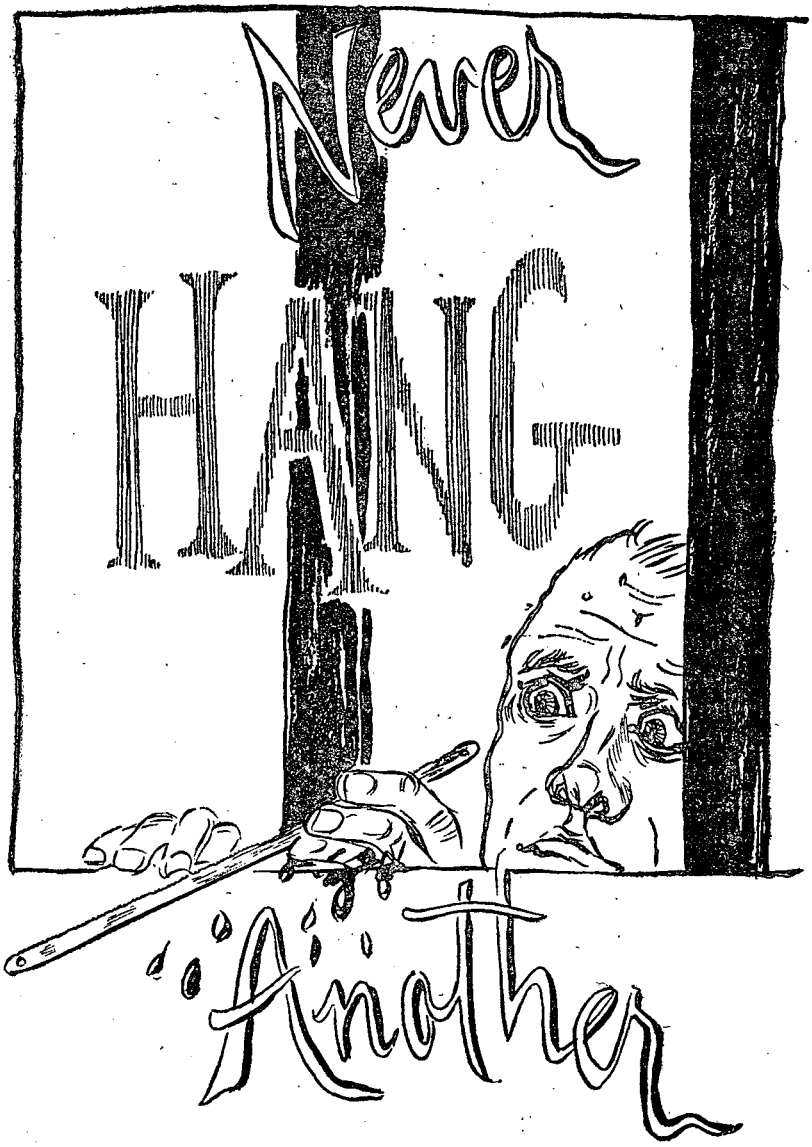

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plead for mercy, fast and strong."

Burke, who thought pleading ought to be confined to hungry dogs, sneered.

"Whenever possible," the prosecutor was saying, "I prefer to present my cases to a Blue Ribbon jury such as this one, whose intelligence can be relied on to decide from facts rather than emotional appeal . . ."

Burke sneered directly into the assorted sheep faces drooping in the jury box. He felt no need to conceal his contempt for these gawking faces and retarded minds, even though he knew that his attitude of superior arrogance had, obviously, prejudiced the jury against him. He refused to grovel or beg. He would not descend to their level even though he knew he might hang.

Blue Ribbon jury? He grinned laconically at it. They deserved a prize, maybe from a freakshow. Probably all related. The last of the Jukes and the Kallikaks.

"The defense summation emphasized that there had been no testimony by any witness who had *seen* the crime committed. Now folks, do you see anything peculiar in that? Next thing, they'll expect killers to perform their monstrous deed right on the television!"

One feeble guffaw died fast in the sizzling heat.

Burke turned his head toward Sheriff Lennie. The Sheriff's attitude toward the defendent had been one of sympathy and respect, and he had often frowned at the blatant prejudice of the court. He was old, lean, well-preserved for his age. He had a pleasant gray-haired dignity, an intelligent and sensitive face. Now the Sheriff returned Burke's gaze with a sad, sympathetic smile. It was not meant to be a reassuring smile. It was merely supportive in a situation he could do nothing about. Burke read in that smile the moral support of a superior fellow human being surrounded by the envious hostility of the ruling mob.

"Court adjourned until morning," the Judge roared suddenly, "or until such time as that blasted air-conditioner is repaired."

The interrupted Prosecutor whined, "But Your Honor, I'm smack in the middle of my big speech!"

"It will have greater dimension delivered in the proper climate," the Judge said. He looked down at Burke with a kind of smile. Burke had seen a similar expression on the face of a tiger about to be fed.

Burke concealed a shiver as he stood up. His nerves were sanded pretty thin at this point, and he knew that it would take all of his inner resources from here on in

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not to crack. He tapped his lawyer on the shoulder.

"Wake up, Pop," he said wryly. "It's beer time."

A lanky deputy, who grinned emptily all the time, snapped handcuffs on Burke's left wrist. Sheriff Lennie walked on Burke's right along the hallway to the jailroom. It was empty, except for a yellowed sink and flushbowl, an iron cot, a dirty bulb set in the ceiling behind wiremesh, and a barred window set high up in the wall. It was old, musty, and the peeling plaster walls sweated. Prisoners were usually confined in the County Jail down the street but Sheriff Lennie had said that Burke might be safer in the courthouse. Not quite so likely to get lynched, he had explained.

This time, after unlocking the handcuffs, the deputy did not make his usual fast getaway out the door. Sheriff Lennie had entered the jailroom and he kept on standing there lighting a cigar and making no motion toward leaving. The deputy hunkered puzzled in the doorway, scratching his head, trying to cope with this change in ritual. Finally he risked a question.

"Sheriff?"

"Yes, Davie," the Sheriff said without turning.

"I got to lock up the prisoner now. Are you coming with me?"

"Go ahead," the Sheriff said.

"Ain't you coming along, Sheriff?"

"Presently."

"You ain't stayin locked up in here with *him!*"

"It doesn't look too good for Mr. Burke," the Sheriff said. "I'd better have a private talk with him, sort of prepare him for the worst. Just in case."

The deputy backed reluctantly out the door. He shook his head. "You're too good to 'em. You treat mad-dogs like as if they was human."

"Go and have yourself a beer, Davie."

"I oughta' be right here in case—"

"Go on, have a beer," the Sheriff said patiently. "I was Sheriff when you were knee-high to a pony. I guess I can handle whatever comes up."

The deputy locked them up together in the jailroom.

The Sheriff motioned for the prisoner to sit on the cot and he did.

"We call him Davie," the Sheriff said. "He claims to be a direct descendent of Davie Crockett."

"What's he take me for, a hungry grizzly?"

"Like he said, you're a mad-dog killer to him."

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"That what you think, Sheriff?"

"Nope. You may even be innocent. If you're guilty, you're not getting a fair trial. You're not getting a trial at all. You don't want to hang, do you?"

Burke moved his fingers inside his wet collar. "I'd rather not," he said.

"They intend for you to hang. Old Baedecker's a hanging judge. They decided on a first degree murder conviction before the trial opened, and Baedecker's never recommended mercy, in court or out."

Burke shivered. "That's how it's been looking to me."

"That's how it is, Mr. Burke. They've got to have a hanging, and they never pick a local boy if they can help it."

"I don't have a chance, do I?"

"Not in that courtroom."

"But I'm innocent."

"You may be. But even if you were guilty and got a fair trial, I don't like hanging a man."

Burke was startled. "You'd do it?"

"Part of my job," the Sheriff said. He stepped near the window and looked up through a bluish haze of cigar smoke. "County's too poor to hire a professional. I have to spring the traps, Mr. Burke. I've been Sheriff quite a spell, and I've hanged quite a few. Old Baedecker's going to tell me to hang you. But I'm not going to do it."

"You're not?"

"Nope."

"Then who is?"

"Nobody," the Sheriff said. "If I can help it."

Sheriff Lennie stepped quickly to the barred door and listened awhile. When he came back toward Burke he had taken a package from beneath his shirt. It was a foot long and half an inch thick. He unpeeled oiled paper from it and handed it to Burke who stared incredulously at six hacksaw blades.

"What's the gag?" Burke finally whispered.

"Put them under your mattress."

Burke took the blades and quickly shoved them under his mattress as though he didn't really believe in their existence.

"Cigar?" the Sheriff asked.

Burke's hands shook as he bit off the end, put the other end in his mouth and stared at the Sheriff's lean brown old hands calmly extending a lighter. Then the Sheriff looked back up at the window.

"Soft iron, Mr. Burke. Probably saw through both those bars in about three hours. Davie won't be back. He gets a brew under his belt and he's gone for the night. Saw through the bottoms, work the

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bottoms a little and they'll fall right out of that upper frame, like Baedecker's teeth when he yells too loud. Rotten wood, Mr. Burke. Rotten, like this whole town."

"But I don't believe I understand," Burke said.

"It's simple. I'm sick of hanging them," the Sheriff said. "I'm retiring in a month and I don't want another on my conscience at this late date. You ever see a man hang? I mean, up close?"

"No," Burke admitted hoarsely.

"You don't read about it in the papers," the Sheriff said. "They don't make movies of it, or show it step by step on television. You think you're an expert with some practice, but you can never figure it right. Supposed to break their necks you know, not strangle them to death, but you can never figure it just right. Sometimes the rope's too short and they strangle. It takes them a long time to go. And then if the rope's too long for the weight, that looks worse. The last one I sent through the trap—well—his head came clear off."

"I—I can do without the details," Burke said.

"Sure. Everybody should be spared the details, Mr. Burke. Let the hangman do it. It's easy to say a man can get out of something if he doesn't like it, but it never is easy to get out of something once you're in it. I wanted to be Sheriff and I ended up hanging them. I wanted to quit, but—listen, you know who stopped me from quitting? My wife. It was Laura always made me go on and hang just one more, then another, and after that—"

The Sheriff stopped himself. His voice had been getting louder and he was breathing heavily. He stood there without saying anything until his breath quieted and the gentle, sad smile returned to his face.

"You see for every hanging I got a bonus, and Laura always liked her spending money. Besides, if I didn't hang them I couldn't be Sheriff and Laura liked being a Sheriff's wife."

The Sheriff had let his cigar go out and he stood holding it out at an angle as though flicking ashes off. Now his voice was so low Burke barely could hear it.

"If it hadn't been for her I'd have left this deadend town a long time back. Lot's of things I'd have done if it hadn't been for her. Places I could have gone, things I could have done . . ."

He paused for a while and his face was shaded in the fading afternoon light. "I know how it feels to be in jail, Mr. Burke. I been in one all my life."

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The Sheriff stepped to the barred door and listened again. Burke heard the echos of children's voices playing across the park. He turned. "You paint pictures, don't you, Mr. Burke?"

"That's why I came down here. Then I ran out of gas and couldn't afford to buy any. That's why I didn't have the money to hire a lawyer. I'm a painter."

"Nobody with real money was ever executed in this country, Mr. Burke. That's another thing, some of them we hang are innocent and that doesn't make a man sleep any better."

Burke thought about it and finally he asked, "You really want me to try sawing my way out tonight?"

"Unless you want to hang. And I don't want to do it."

"What chance have I got after I start running?"

"A very good chance, or I wouldn't be springing you. I don't want you caught and brought back so I would have to hang you. I've got an escape route all worked out for you, Mr. Burke. You'll go through the swamp and stay over at my hunting lodge a day or so. Then I'll drive you to the State line in my pickup truck."

"Your house?" Burke whispered.

"I guess the last place they'd look for you is at the Sheriff's house."

"I guess that's right," Burke said.

"Now get these directions straight, Mr. Burke. You get off the trail at night and you're a goner. They'll get Abe's coondogs on you and you're as good as hanged."

Burke listened carefully to the directions, and then the Sheriff wished him luck, went out and locked the jailroom door.

Burke waited until the courthouse clock struck nine and went to work on the two window bars. By standing on the sink and stretching his length up hard, he could reach just high enough to saw at the base of the bars. The position was awkward. The resulting strain was agonizing. Sawing with blades that were unsupported by a frame would have been difficult in any case, but having to work under those conditions was nearly impossible, even when goaded by the possibility of escaping the noose. The blades kept bending. He had to grip the blade in close to the bar and use frustratingly small strokes. The result was that his knuckles kept scraping on the splintered wood and rough brick. His hand was soon torn, the skin worn through to the knuckle bones. Blood ran down his arm.

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The blades broke. By the time he sawed through the first bar, four blades had snapped in several places and the teeth were gone. But he felt that he had the knack of it and if he were careful he was sure he would cut through the second bar with the two remaining blades.

When the sixth and last blade broke it was almost one o'clock in the morning. His quivering fingers felt around the base of the second bar and it seemed to him that he had sawed through except for maybe less than a sixteenth of an inch. He was sure he could pry it loose.

He fell when he got down from the sink and lay paralyzed on the floor. He had cracked his head on the edge of the sink when he fell, and it was some time before he was really conscious again. His head throbbed and the skin was broken and bleeding above his left ear. He still lay for a few more minutes before he was able to get up and walk around the room, dizzily. The strain of that unbroken stretching position had numbed his nerves and muscles.

But the way to pry out the bars had come to him. Using one rounded end of a hacksaw blade as a screwdriver, he unhinged the toilet seat. The wood was strong and he climbed back up onto the sink and used it to lever at the bars. He paused now and then and listened, but he never heard a sound of anything over there on the dark fringe of the park except nightbirds, crickets, mosquitoes and the singing of treefrogs.

The bars came loose finally at the bottom, after effort that left him dripping sweat and leaning against the wall fighting exhaustion. He worked the bars back and forth and they came out of the top frame in a choking shower of rotten wood dust, and biting termites. He took time for a few deep breaths, then started squeezing himself through the narrow opening.

It was barely possible to repress moans of pain as the jagged edges of the severed bars slashed along the length of his squirming chest and belly.

He fell to the wet grass and dropped on his hands and knees getting his breath, and making small whining noises of pain like a hurt dog. His shirt was ripped down the front. He was bleeding from the long parallel gashes down his chest and belly. He got to his feet. He tied the shirt together and ran. The directions that the Sheriff had given him ran through his mind as his feet ran over the wet grass. He felt stronger as he ran away from the jail and

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into an opening sense of freedom. He had never thought of freedom before, had taken it pretty much for granted. He didn't really think about it now except to realize how much a man will do to get it back.

First he had to run South until he reached the Bayou Road that paralleled the swamp in an East and West direction. He headed through back yards, down a road where hogs snorted and ran off into the weeds. He crossed an open turnip field taking a shortcut toward the swamp. It was the first time in years he had remembered that he was once a Boy Scout. But now he remembered how to find the Big Dipper and the North Star and he was able to keep heading South.

He turned right on Bayou Road and slowed to a trot as he ran along the trail. Fine gray dust rose in the moonlight. Mist drifted in from the swamp, and sometimes things moved in it, and he crouched down trembling and waiting, but he didn't see men. Once he saw a mule, and another time he saw more hogs rooting beside the road.

He kept going at a steady trot until he came to the three cypress trees silhouetted high up above the other trees against the moon. He ran off into the swamp heading for those trees where the Sheriff had said he would find a boat. It was important to get off into the swamp in that boat. They might find out he was missing any time and get the dogs after him.

As he floundered deeper into the swamp, blades of coarse grass slashed his legs. Mosquitos came at him in black, hungry clouds. He sloshed in mud and brackish water. He tripped on vines and fell and crawled through mud and rotting grass. He screamed once when something big and bloated and slimy slithered across his arm. He thought of moccasins and rattlesnakes. He thought of alligators, too, when they began sending their guttural grunts through the dark. There were other things to thing of, too, such as garfish and leeches. But there was nothing he could do about any of those things. All he could do was keep moving and trust to luck. All he had to do to keep moving was remember how it had been back there in court waiting to hang.

He found the flat-bottomed boat moored to a snarl of cypress roots twisted above black water like a nest of snakes. He began poling down the channel. Down the channel, go with the current, the Sheriff had said, until you see two yellow lanterns burning close to-

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gether on the left. Put in there and it was only a short walk to the Sheriff's house.

He began to feel very weak and realized he had probably lost a lot of blood. Nothing he could do about that either now. He had to keep going and get well hidden away before daylight. He sat in the boat resting a while, the pole across the gunwales, while the flat-bottomed craft drifted where the stream was so narrow that vegetation slithered over his shoulders. It glided past a glade between jackstraw piles of abandoned cypress logs visible in the moonlight.

When he forced himself to start poling again, the pulling of his chest muscles burned as if he were being branded with hot metal. The moon seemed cold through the mist and shadows came alive. An alligator threshed and rolled in a hyacinth bed as Burke poled through a long stretch choked with purple water hyacinths and he remembered that this was the sort of thing he had come South to paint. Instead he had gotten potted in a saloon and ended up being groomed for the hangman's noose.

The boat sagged in a dead backwash demanding powerful thrusts with the pole, then Burke had to rest again. He breathed painfully and cried out in a stifled sickened way as he realized that the dark blotches on his chest and arms and legs were leeches. He yelled out loud, then clapped his muddy hand across his mouth. He remembered that it was bad trying to tear the blood-sucking devils out of your flesh. He would have to wait, burn them out with a cigarette or something.

Anyway, the mosquitoes were worse. They clouded in more thickly by the minute, attracted by his blood and sweat. They droned around his head. They settled on his hands and buried their stings in his face and neck and chest. They came in thicker and struck against him like tiny bullets. You couldn't scare them away, he found that out. Movement didn't shake them. They had to be wiped off like some kind of black shivering fungus, but he had no time for that. He had to keep moving.

He poled through curtains of moss between wild trees hanging with knobby lemons as big as footballs and studded with inch-long thorns. He hated the place. When he got out he would never again have any desire to paint any part of it. Then there was a large basin where black water lay like glass under the moon. There was the pale yellow light of the lanterns to his left. He angled that way and slid the boat into mud, into the

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grass among a dense froth of flame vines and cobwebs.

He fell getting out of the boat and had to crawl in sucking mud before he was up on higher dryer ground, and he fought through jungled splotches of darkness and walls of trees where the moonlight flooded in through a frozen stillness.

He found the board path leading away to the Sheriff's fishing lodge and a few hundred yards farther on he saw the bleached white of the building half in the moonlit shadows, and the shine of a palm-thatched roof.

Light shone through bamboo shades as Burke stumbled up the steps and across the porch to the door. He started to knock as the door jerked open, and he made a slight slushing and plopping sound as he half-fell forward into a blinding light.

He stood swaying a little and blinking until his eyes readjusted to the glow from several shaded lamps.

The Sheriff, who wore a T-shirt, slacks and houseslippers, was backing away toward a big brown leather chair. A pipe rack fell and a large selection of pipes clattered on the floor. Behind him was a long leather couch facing a dead fireplace. An air-conditioner hummed and Burke stood sucking at the cooling atmosphere. The Sheriff's face had paled.

"You look sort of bad," he finally said.

Burke tried to grin, but his swollen face wouldn't work. He felt his muscles quivering individually like a frog's.

"I don't feel so good," he said. His voice startled him. It had an

odd whistling sound.

He started to fall, but stumbled forward and grabbed onto the back of the couch. Then he saw the body lying on the floor. He stared down at the body, numbly at first, uncomprehending. A woman, elderly, and she had been fat, very fat. That was all he would ever know about her. There was hardly anything recognizable about what remained of her face. And that, Burke thought, was be-

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cause of the poker lying a foot from her left arm.

As bad as Burke had felt, he suddenly felt a lot worse as something inside of him turned to ice.

"My wife," he heard the Sheriff say behind him. "Laura . . . remember I told you about Laura?"

As Burke turned away from Laura, he saw the Sheriff was dialing a telephone. In his other hand he held a revolver. It was pointing at Burke.

"You can kennel those hounddogs of yours," the Sheriff was saying. "The killer turned up here. That's right. Burke. I was out doing some night fishing and when I got back he was here. But I got back here a little late." The Sheriff's voice broke slightly. "Laura was here. He got to her. He killed her." The Sheriff took a deep breath. "I figure someone had told him about how to find my place and he intended to hole up here and maybe use one of us as a hostage. But when he saw Laura I guess he couldn't contain himself. No, you can take your time getting here. He won't cause no more trouble. I took care of that. I saved the county a little money."

The Sheriff dropped the receiver. He sat down and crossed his legs and pointed the revolver halfway across the room at Burke.

"I got you out of jail, Mr. Burke. And you got me out. We're even."

Burke tried to move. He tried to say something, but his swollen face was paralyzed. Anyway, he knew it wouldn't have made any difference.

"They were going to hang you anyway, Mr. Burke. And this is so much easier. It really is," he said with an intense and unmistakable sincerity. "I ought to know how much better it is, I mean quick and clean this way. And like I said, I'd never hang another man."

Burke managed a desperate stumbling lunge, but his knees went out from under him before he took five steps. The last thing he remembered was a doubt as to whether or not the jury would really have found him guilty after all.

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If you are one of those persons who like to have your future foretold, whether by phrenology, crystal ball, palmistry, or whatever method, my advice to you is brief: don't forget to duck.

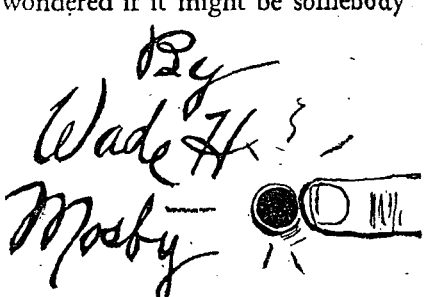
THEIR doorbell rang at exactly 9:20 p.m. Saturday.

Miss Melissa later was able to testify with some certainty on this point, because she recalled looking at the old clock on the mantel.

It was quite unusual for their doorbell to ring in the evening, and most unusual for it to ring after 8 o'clock, two nights in a row.

She glanced at her sister, but Miss Clara only shrugged. Neither had invited guests, nor was it likely that either would have done so without telling the other. For this was one of the unwritten rules that had enabled the Misses Melissa and Clara Weston to live together harmoniously for 30 years.

The bell rang again, insistently. Miss Clara, bulky and firm jawed, wondered if it might be somebody from the office. She was president and treasurer of the Weston Lumber & Supply Co., the business they had inherited from their father.



Miss Melissa, slender and wiry, wondered if it were someone about the house again. Her role was that of cook and housekeeper. It was an arrangement eminently satisfactory to both.

The bell shrilled a third time.

"I'll go," Miss Clara said. She walked briskly to the door, smoothing her skirt en route. She turned on the porch light, then opened the door.

"Yes?" she inquired.

The door was pushed wide, sending Miss Clara off balance, and two men had pushed into the house and closed the door behind them before she could catch her breath.

One of the men turned off the porch light and, for a moment, peered out of the small window at the top of the door.

"What do you want?" Miss Clara demanded.

"See anybody?" the shorter man inquired of his companion.

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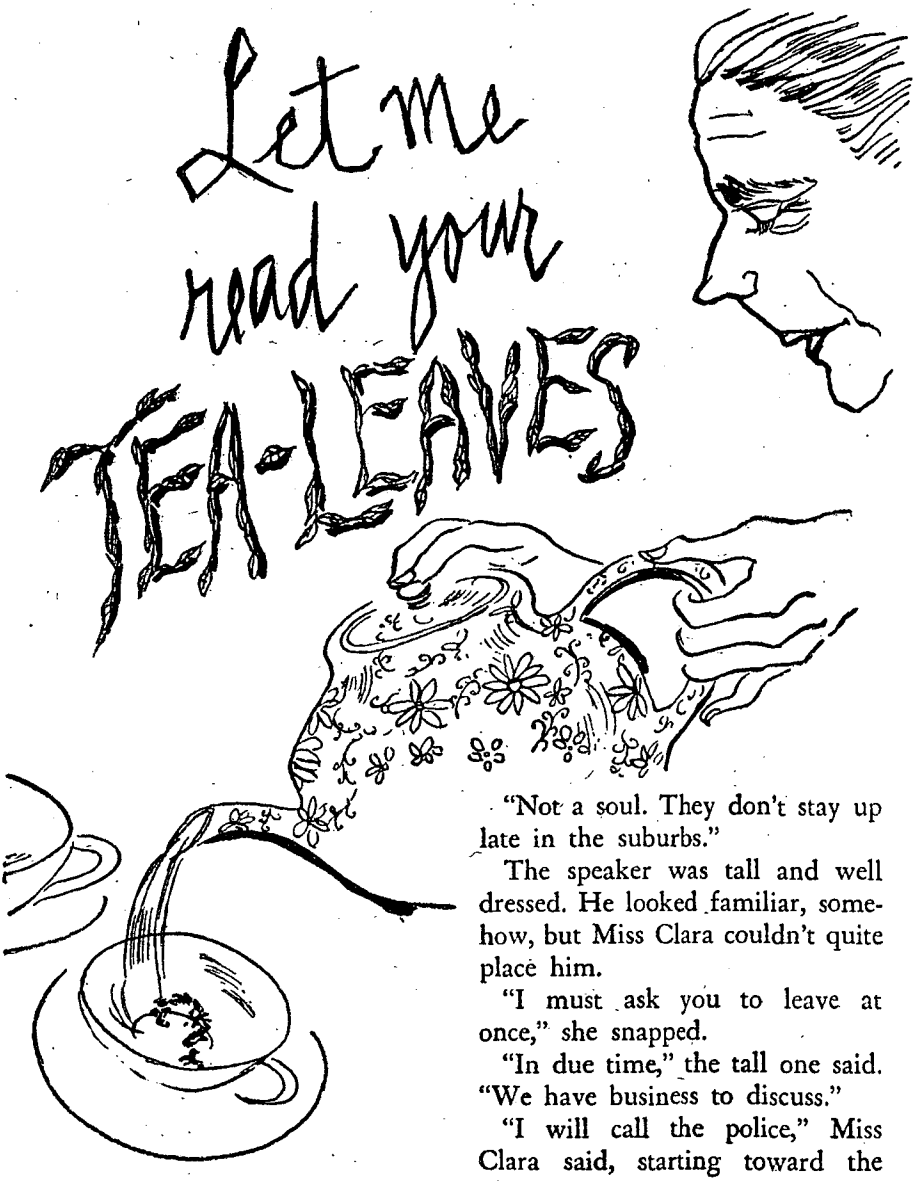

"Not a soul. They don't stay up late in the suburbs."

The speaker was tall and well dressed. He looked familiar, somehow, but Miss Clara couldn't quite place him.

"I must ask you to leave at once," she snapped.

"In due time," the tall one said. "We have business to discuss."

"I will call the police," Miss Clara said, starting toward the phone.

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"I wouldn't," he said, calmly.

The other man had stepped closer to her, and Miss Clara for the first time noticed the gun in his hand.

"George has a way about him, Miss Weston," the tall one said. "I suggest we join your sister."

Miss Melissa watched in bewilderment as the three filed into the living room.

"Oh!" she gasped in recognition and relief. "You're the power company men who came here last night. Do you have to look for that short circuit again?"

"Yeah," George said.

"Heavens—you spent enough time looking for it last night," Miss Melissa said. "You went through this house from top to bottom. Clara told you there was nothing wrong with our electricity."

"They're not from the power company at all, Melissa," Miss Clara snapped in irritation. "They're hoodlums—they came here last night to . . . to case the joint."

The tall one laughed.

"A cliché, Miss Weston," he said. "But I'm glad you understand the situation. George will not point the gun at you—but he will keep it handy to remind you that this is a business call. Now please sit down."

It was not an invitation. Miss Clara shrugged resignedly and sat on the sofa beside her sister. George looked around the room uneasily.

"What about the windows—should I pull the shades?"

"No need to," the tall one said. "The ivy covers those windows."

George sat down gingerly in a rocking chair.

"Just what is it that you want here?" Miss Clara demanded.

"Money, Miss Weston," the tall one said, lighting a cigarette. Miss Clara noticed that he had not removed his gloves. "Money," he sighed through a cloud of smoke. "And we mean to get it. We know a great deal about this house—and about you and your sister."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Just what I said. You are quite well known in this town, we have found. You are local characters—loaded with dough but keeping every penny. Do-it-yourselfers."

"We were taught," Miss Clara sniffed, "that there is virtue in self-sufficiency."

"Even self-sufficiency can be overworked. Banking, for example, is not a job for two old ladies."

Miss Clara became a shade paler; Miss Melissa's work-roughened hands trembled a little as she continued with her needlepoint. His meaning was clear—and things fell

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into a deadly focus . . . the gun, the gloved hands, the careful search the night before. And Miss Clara's mistrust of banks—since the failure of the one she had her account in back in 1932—was common knowledge.

"You don't talk like a hoodlum," Miss Melissa blurted. "Why are you acting like one?"

"I had hoped that I wasn't acting like one, Miss Melissa," the gloved man said. "I-am, as a matter of fact, known as Gentleman John."

"But you do mean to rob us?"

"We intend to profit from research, to put it another way. We know, from the time we invested last night, that the wall safe is behind that picture to the left of the mantel."

"And you're going to open it. Why didn't you do it last night?"

John smiled lazily. "More research. There's always more in it after a busy Saturday."

"Well," Miss Clara sputtered with some impatience, "what are you waiting for? Open it."

"Not I. One of you will open it for me. You both know the combination."

"And if we refuse?"

"A bridge we'll cross—if we come to it." John slouched comfortably in the chair. "We're in no hurry. I should dislike using force, but if it becomes necessary . . . no one would miss you until Monday."

The hard edge that had come into his voice, combined with his self-assurance, created a hypnotic aura of inevitability. Miss Clara tried to keep her voice under control when she spoke again.

"We are not going to open the safe for you," she said.

"Perhaps not," John yawned elaborately. "Not 'we,' but one of you will. Miss Melissa, for instance, might prefer opening the safe to seeing you harmed."

He looked meaningfully at the gun dangling from George's fingers. John enjoyed the effect he

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was creating as the author and director and leading figure of this moment of drama. He pulled the easy chair closer to the sofa so that only a small tea table separated him from the sisters. Miss Melissa sobbed convulsively, and Miss Clara put a large protective arm around her.

"Very touching," John sneered, "and very revealing. The weak and the strong—the lion and the lamb."

There was a silence, broken only by Miss Melissa's sniffling.

Miss Clara glared at their tormentor.

"It is clear," John continued, "that Miss Clara's word is law. You see, you can learn a great deal about people by merely observing them. Miss Clara, the woman of action—Miss Melissa, the timid homebody."

He chuckled over the analysis.

Miss Melissa dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief and glanced towards the clock.

"Expecting someone?" John asked.

"No . . . it's just that at 9:30 every evening, I put the teakettle on the stove. We have tea before we . . . retire."

John's eyebrows lifted in amusement.

"Tea every night at 9:30?" he said. "You are slaves to routine. The house, the office, Miss Clara's decisions, all your nice money piled in that safe—and tea every night, like clockwork."

"It *is* silly, I suppose," Miss Melissa said.

"Not at all!" John said generously. "Let's all have tea—perhaps it will help you decide which of you will turn the dial for me."

"I tell fortunes," Miss Melissa announced, brightening.

"With tea leaves?" John's brows went up again. "Do tell! You must do it for us. George, you go along with Miss Melissa and see that she sticks to tea. I'll keep Miss Clara company."

It was a macabre touch that appealed to John. He was grinning sardonically when Miss Melissa returned with a neat tray. She seemed almost gay, John observed, evidently finding reassurance in routine.

From the large, old-fashioned pot she filled Miss Clara's cup, then John's, her own and finally George's.

Miss Clara glanced at her sister strangely, then looked at her cup with something less than enthusiasm.

"Now for the fortunes," Miss Melissa said brightly. She gazed into her sister's cup. "You see the way the leaves have settled into sort of a question mark? That means there's a big decision in

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your future, one you'll have to act on quickly."

John laughed condescendingly at Miss Melissa's unintentional irony. George leaned over the table for a better view of Miss Clara's cup. Miss Melissa turned to him.

"Now your fortune, Mr. George," she babbled. "Goodness! You don't seem to have one! That's because I poured your cup last—you didn't get any tea leaves. Here—I'll give you some."

Miss Melissa moved birdlike to George's side. Her thin but sinewy arm swung the pot in a businesslike arc that terminated noisily against George's head. The pot shattered and George, slumping to the floor, lost interest in his immediate future.

John was half out of his chair when the scalding tea from Miss Clara's cup sloshed into his face. He clawed at his eyes, and when he was able to open them, he was looking into the barrel of George's gun. At the handle end, hard-eyed and grim, was Miss Clara.

"I don't think," she said, "that you have very much future left."

"Don't shoot!" It was Miss Melissa's voice, calm and commanding. Miss Clara looked surprised.

"He's standing on my hooked rug," Miss Melissa pointed out, "and you know how difficult it would be to remove bloodstains."

"That's true," said Miss Clara agreeably. "Perhaps, Mr. John, you could move over to the hearth . . . under the safe. Just so. Thank you."

She leveled the gun at his chest.

"Wait," Miss Melissa said. "I think it might be better to call the police. This really isn't a do-it-yourself project."

She pattered off to the telephone.

"All right, Melissa," Miss Clara sighed. "You're the boss. But the floor is a mess anyway—just look at that teapot, in a thousand pieces."

"Well," Miss Melissa said cheerfully as she began dialing, "we only got it out for company, anyway. You know how we both detest tea."

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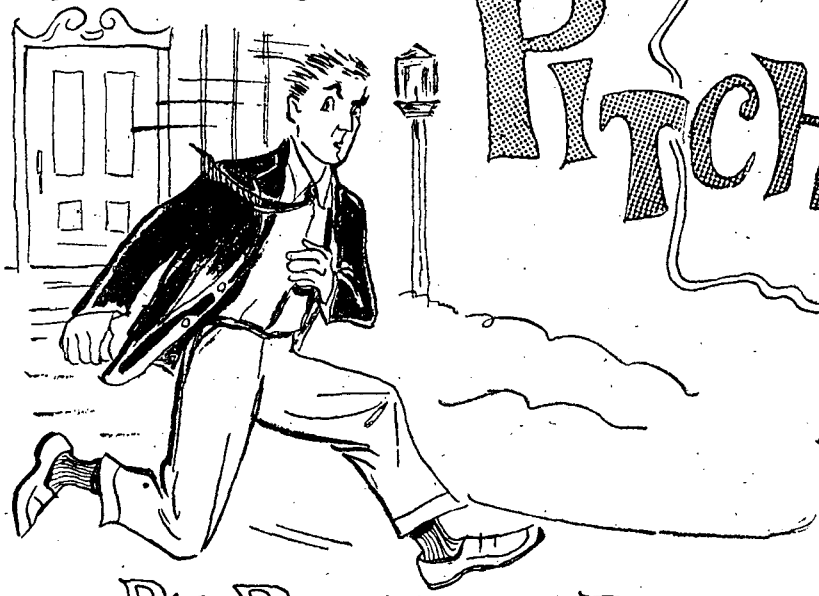
MAKE YOUR PITCH



By BORDEN DEAL

I WAS doing real good, working phones for Morgen & David Circus. Working phones, you're out ahead of the circus, selling tickets with a cold turkey telephone pitch under the auspices of the local organization. If you're a good pitchman, you can make lots of money with a set-up like that. And believe me, I was making money. I had a powder-blue convertible, plenty of fancy threads, and all the circus tickets I needed to interest those small-town girls with stars in their eyes.

It was our last day for this town and I had just finished my shift on the phones. I decided to get a bite

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to eat before I loaded the convertible and took off. While I was collecting my day money, Jim Watson said, "Slim, you going to be with us on the next deal?"

"I've been on the phones so long they ring in my ears all night long," I said. "I may just do a quick walk-away and see you later on in the season."

"We're booked solid all the way to Florida," Jim said. "We need a good man like you."

"I'll let you know," I told him. "I feel like being fancy-free for a while."

He laughed. "There's nothing fancier and freer than a phone man," he said. "What are you looking for, Slim?"

"I'm just looking," I said. "Just looking."

There was a pretty good restaurant just a block away from the hotel. I walked down the small-town street, not paying much attention to anything except the girls. All the small towns are alike, north and south, east and west, and I think I've been in all of them, looking for the buck. But the women . . . they always know when you're a stranger in town. I don't know how they know it. But there is a speculation in the way they look at you that's always exciting, north or south, east or west. If you've got free circus tickets in your pocket, that makes you not just a stranger, but a special kind of stranger. You're show business. And they love the idea of show business.

I found a booth in the restaurant and had just ordered my dinner when this woman sat down opposite me. You know the kind of woman that reaches her perfection at thirty-five? Most of them have had their best days by the time they're eighteen or twenty. But once in a while there'll be one who isn't very much at eighteen, who's only a little better at twenty-five, but by the time she's thirty-five she's all that a man could ever hope to behold. This was one of them.

She was not tall, about five-two, I guess, and she was better dressed than most small-town women. She had something of the flair that you don't usually see except in the big cities. Her hair was ash-blonde and

They call them pitchmen, those fast talking, fast moving men who precede a carnival or a circus into a given area, make their pitch, and then go. The survival rate among them is high, due to their peculiar combination of talents.

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there was a special something in her face that I've learned to look for and to appreciate when I find it. I couldn't say just what it is, but it tells you that here's a woman who's not owned by any man.

"I want to talk to you, if you don't mind," she said.

I looked at her left hand. She had a gorgeous diamond. "I'm available," I said, with a flick of excitement inside me.

"You're with the circus phone crew?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "At least up until five minutes ago. I don't know whether I'll be with them tomorrow or not." She didn't seem to be the kind of woman who'd be interested in the kind of man I am. But you never can tell. "What's on your mind?" I said boldly. "Want some circus tickets?"

"No," she said. She reached out one hand to the glass of ice water beside my plate. She did not drink from it but began turning the glass around and around.

I always look at a woman's hands. You can tell a lot about a woman from the quality of her hands. It's a lot better than looking at their faces, because any woman can work sheer magic with a face. But there's not much you can do with hands. She had a firm, muscular hand, not too large. You could tell that she took care of them. The fingers were shorter than usual for the length of her palm so that her hands were square-looking. All in all, the most interesting hand I had seen in a long time.

She looked up at me from the glass. It was the first time I'd had a direct view of her eyes. They were hazel, flecked with green. Interesting eyes. Interesting hands. Interesting woman.

"No," she said. She turned the glass another careful circle, not taking her eyes from mine. Her voice was lower now, huskier, as though she found the words rather difficult to say. "I want you to kill a man."

It jarred me. I'd expected anything in the world except that simple, blunt statement. For just a minute, then, looking at her, I wasn't seeing a woman any more. It was only a flick of a second and then she was back again and somehow she was more desirable than she had been before. But the shock was still cold in the pit of my stomach. To cover it up I leaned back in the booth and looked at her.

"That's not my pitch," I said. "You've got me wrong, lady."

Her eyes were cold on my face and I wondered where the warmth had gone. "Making money is your pitch, as you call it, isn't it?" she said.

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"Well, yes," I said. "I do like to make money."

She was leaning over the table now, straining toward me, and her voice was tenser and huskier than it had been before.

"Then how would you like to make twenty-five thousand dollars?"

That was enough money for the sound of it to be as strong a shock to me as her first declaration. I looked down at my plate, then I pushed it away from me. Suddenly I didn't want to eat any more. Then I looked up at her again, feeling her watching me before I could see her eyes.

"Lady," I said. "I'm a talker. I've been talking all my life. I can sell you anything there is to be sold. I can do a carny pitch, or a phone pitch, or I can sell neckties on the street. If you want a man talked to death, I'm the man who can do the job for you. But I gather that's not what you had in mind."

"No," she said. "You can't talk this man to death."

"Who is he?" I said.

"My husband," she said.

"Is it necessary to kill him?" I said. "Couldn't you just leave him? That would be simpler all the way around. I've got a blue convertible out there in the street."

"No," she said. "He has money."

I shook my head. "You'll have to get you another boy," I said. "This just isn't my racket, baby."

Her eyes flinched at the sound of the word "baby". I'd called her "lady" before. But there is a certain intimacy which springs up between two people quietly discussing cold-blooded murder.

"Don't forget the twenty-five thousand dollars," she said.

"I'm not likely to forget anything," I said. "Why me? Surely there's some local talent."

"That's just what's wrong," she said. "Local talent won't do. I want a man who's here today and gone tomorrow. A man I'll never see again, this town will never see again. And you're leaving soon, aren't you?"

"In just about five minutes," I said.

She leaned forward again. "You could do it tonight," she said. "No one would ever suspect you. There would be nothing to tie us together. And you'd have twenty-five thousand dollars in your pocket."

"You've got it?" I said.

She looked around the restaurant, then she opened her bag, tilting it toward me. It was a big bag. I could see the tight green clutter of bills inside, bulging the bag. When I saw the money a cold excitement started deep down in that part of me I hadn't been able

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to fill with the food on my plate. For the first time I began to think that it might happen. I could see what she meant. A bold move by a stranger who had a reason to be in town and a reason to be leaving might very well baffle the local meatheads.

I looked around the restaurant. "Suppose someone has seen us here?" I said.

"That's a chance I had to take," she said steadily. "But it's the only risk." She cased the restaurant carefully. "I don't see anyone I know," she said. "This is not a place where I come, usually."

"It would be smart to get out of here, though," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Then we can go into greater detail. I'll walk down the block. You can follow me and pick me up in your car. I know a place where I'm sure we can be alone."

Her eyes flickered when she said the word "alone" and I thought, *There may be more in this than the twenty-five thousand.* I liked the thought and, at the same time, I didn't.

"All right then," I said. "I'll pick you up. I'm not promising anything. But we can talk about it."

I still didn't know how it had happened. I felt like the woman who looks utterly unapproachable; but, if you handle it right, all of a sudden she finds she's not discussing the basic question at all, but only whether it's going to be your apartment or hers. Murder is like sex; once the question is admitted, you can't go back to trivialities.

She stood up. She went out very quickly and I watched her go, seeing the way she walked, proud and high, like a lovely woman of thirty-five should walk. After she was gone I looked down at my plate again. But the food didn't interest me. There was something much more powerful than the appetite for food working inside me and I thought, *Slim, is this the sort of thing you can do, after all?*

I picked her up on a quiet street three blocks from the restaurant. She got into the car when I slowed. She did not speak except to give me the directions. We went out of town and turned off onto a graveled country road that wound up into the hills. I kept my eyes straight ahead, not wanting to look at her. I was still wondering if I really intended to kill a man for twenty-five thousand dollars.

At last she motioned toward a turn-out beside the road. We were on a high hill overlooking the town. We sat for a moment staring down into the sparse sparkle of lights. Small towns always look so lonely when you can see the space around them.

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She turned her shadowy head and looked at me. "Well," she demanded. "Have you decided yet?"

"Just what did you have in mind?" I said carefully.

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's very simple, really," she said. "He won't be home until eleven tonight. You can be waiting in the living room for him. When he walks in you shoot him. After you're sure he's dead, you can break a window and leave. I will be in the bedroom. I'll give you ten minutes head start and then I'll call the police and report that a prowler has just shot my husband."

"Will ten minutes be enough?" I said.

"It will be if you start out of town immediately," she said. "After all, there'll be no visible reason for you to be the murderer. And you were leaving anyway."

"What about the money?" I said. "When do I get that?"

She opened her bag and took out the money. "Here's five thousand now," she said. "You get the other twenty thousand after he's dead."

She handed me the five thousand dollars worth of the green stuff. My hand reached out almost of itself to take the bills. I held them crushed hard, feeling their smoothness and their power. I'd never had a chance at twenty-five thousand dollars in my life. I'd made money, sure, but it was always in little chunks here and there. Like any talker, I'd always been looking for the big one, feeling that sooner or later it would come along. Now it had, and I wondered whether I had guts enough to take it. Because it hadn't come the way I'd expected it. I'd expected to have a chance with a shill or a confidence game or a come-on, the kind of deal that fitted with my talents. But this was strictly action.

"Why do you want to kill him?" I said.

She did not turn her head to look at me. "See that ridge of hills on the other side of town?" she said.

"Yes," I said.

"I was born there," she said. "I'm a country girl. When I was fourteen, I knew there was only one thing I wanted to do . . . live in a town with sidewalks and street lights and movie theaters. I wanted to live in a house with running water and electricity and a television set." She moved her shoulders in an indefinable way. "There were eight kids in our family," she said. "We lived in a house that had four rooms. So I came to town. I met Carl, and I married him."

"So you got what you wanted," I

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said. I eyed her quizzically.

"Yes," she said. "Now I intend to go on."

"How did you happen to marry your husband?" I said.

"I came to town when I was sixteen," she said. "On the first day I was here, I saw him drive by in a car. I could tell by the car and by the way he looked and the way he drove that this was the kind of man that I needed to marry." She dug into the bag for a pack of cigarettes. She took out a cigarette and lit it. She threw the match out of the window, a brief flame arcing through the darkness. "I found out where he ate supper every night," she said. "I got a job in that restaurant." She shrugged her shoulders.

I had watched her face across the darkness while she was talking and I knew that she was telling the truth. We sat still for a moment, then I leaned over and kissed her. She did not flinch, she did not push me away. She merely sat cold and still under the kiss until I stopped. I drew away from her.

"You're not the man I'm looking for now," she said.

So it was going to be strictly a cash proposition. I leaned away from her and stared out over the wheel. "I don't know whether cash is enough or not," I said.

"What else do you want?" she said. She knew what I wanted.

"You don't go with the deal?" I said.

"No," she said. "I told you. You're not the man."

"What are you going to do after it's over?" I said.

"I'll wait a while," she said. "It'll take time to get the money that will be in his estate. Then I will go to the city."

She took her eyes away from the distant sparkle of lights and looked at me. "Will you do it?" she said.

I took a deep breath. "Yes," I said.

It surprised me, too. There was a change in her face, as though she had not expected me to agree. But far back in my mind had been the thought that you only get one chance at the big one and, if I passed this time, it would never come my way again. There's a lot that a talking man can do with twenty-five thousand dollars. You can spend your life talking, but if you don't have the capital to back up your spiel and your ideas, you're nowhere. That's the way I'd always been. All I needed was some money to begin with. I would have it now, and I knew I could parlay it into the big bank roll. So it wasn't my kind of action. So I would fit myself to the deal, instead of making the deal fit itself to me.

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"What about the gun?" I said.

She delved into that bottomless bag of hers and came up with a .32 revolver. She handed it to me, after wiping it carefully with the scarf from the bag.

"Take it with you when you leave," she said. "Ditch it somewhere a thousand miles away."

"You've got it all figured, haven't you?"

"Yes," she said. "Are you ready to go as soon as it's over?"

"I'll have to pick up my luggage at the hotel," I said. "My walk-away money is in my kick and, believe me, I won't need a road map."

"Take me back to town," she said. "Then you can follow me home so you can find the house again later on."

I started the engine, backed the car, and drove toward town. We were silent again, though we were the closest kind of partners two people can ever be. I felt closer to her than to any woman I'd ever known, even though our single kiss had been a nothing. We stopped on a dark street and she got out of the car.

"At ten-thirty, just come in the front door and wait in the living room," she said. "The house will be dark. He'll come in around eleven and then you can do the job."

She walked away quickly and I watched her going down the street, thinking that this town didn't have the faintest idea of the kind of woman they had adopted from their countryside. I almost wished that she was going with me, or that somewhere, sometime, we would meet again. But I knew that was no good. I was her tool, just like the money and the gun, and for my own purposes I was content to be her tool.

She got into a big car down the street and I followed her as she drove through the streets of the town. She went out a tree-shaded avenue, turned right, and pulled into the driveway of a big house. It was brick, long and low, and the grounds around it must have been at least an acre in size. The husband had money, all right.

After she had gone into the house, I drove back to the hotel to collect my luggage. Going into the lobby, I met Jim Watson coming out.

"Jim," I said. "I've made up my mind. I'm cutting out for a while."

"Well, they come and they go," Jim said cheerfully. "See you around, Slim, boy." He went on.

That's the way it is. Nobody is surprised when a phone man comes or when a phone man goes. They pay every day, so you can be free to leave any time you want to. I

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was one of Jim's favorite workers but, the way he'd acted, you couldn't tell whether he cared ever to see me again. And, with luck, he never would.

I didn't get fidgety as the time moved on to the big moment. I seemed to get harder inside, colder, more sure of myself. I had expected to be nervous, if not frightened, but sitting in the car and casing the house from a distance for a few minutes while I smoked a cigarette, I found my hands as steady as a rock.

I got out of the car and sauntered up the walk to the house as though I were an honored guest. I did not ring the bell. I pushed the door and it was unlocked. I stepped inside a small foyer and looked into the dark living room. I would have a short wait, then I would kill a man. I would collect my money and I would go into my brand-new world.

Everything was set up just the way we had planned. I touched the gun in my pocket, then I walked into the dark living room. I stopped in the middle of the floor space and looked around, planning the best place to wait for the man to come. As I turned, surveying the room, the lights suddenly blazed on. I ducked, my hand going swiftly toward my pocket. The man stood in the bedroom doorway, the gun in his hand pointed unwaveringly toward me.

He was a stocky, powerful man, considerably older than I was. There was gray in his hair, lines in his face. On his shirt was pinned the badge of a lawman.

I was utterly stunned. I stood still, my hand arrested in its motion toward the gun. He watched me for a moment, then he began walking toward me. I wanted to run, but I knew he would kill me if I moved. I didn't have time to wonder what had gone wrong for behind him, standing in the bedroom doorway, I saw the woman.

"You're right on time," he said. "Very commendable, young man."

"What do you mean?" I said. "I came to . . ."

"I know why you came," he said. "You came to kill me. You thought."

I looked from him to the woman. "Listen," I said. "What's the deal here?"

He laughed. He came closer to me, then motioned her to come around him. "Get the money," he said.

She did not avoid my eyes as she walked toward me, careful not to block the gun. She folded my lapel back so she could get my wallet out of the breast pocket. She opened the wallet deftly and ex-

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tracted the money. Then she took the gun out of my pocket.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Some of that money is mine."

"Some of it was yours," the man said. "It's hers, now."

She counted the money swiftly. "It's all here," she said. "My five thousand, and almost three thousand more."

I was baffled and angry. "Listen," I said. "Just what the devil . . ."

He laughed again. I was beginning to get tired of the sound of his laugh. "Don't you know yet?" he said.

"I sure don't," I said.

"This is Clara's little game," he said. "She likes to work it once in a while. It gives her pin money, a feeling of independence. You know how a wife likes to have a little money of her own."

"You mean . . ." I said. "All that talk about . . ."

"Yes," he said. "Clara has used several stories. But that one is really the best, don't you think?"

I looked at her. There was a small smile on her face as she looked down at the money. She looked up at her husband.

"It's a good haul, Carl," she said. "Not many of them have that much money on them. We caught him just right."

"What's the tin badge for?" I said. "Do you think that gives you the authority to . . ."

"I'm the Sheriff of this county," he said mockingly. "Didn't she tell you?"

"No," I said. "It seems there's a lot she didn't tell me. But if you're the Sheriff . . ."

He sat down in a chair, holding the gun carelessly pointed toward me. "I love my wife," he said. "When she married me, I knew it was because of my money. I told her then I'd do anything in the world for her. And I meant it."

Her eyes were on him as he talked. "I love you, Carl," she said. "You know that, don't you?"

He chuckled. "Sure," he said. "You love me. Because I let you play your little games."

"I'm going to Florida next week," she said. "I'll bet it all on the horses and the dogs." Her voice was very happy.

I stood stiff and straight in the living room. "So what happens now?" I said.

He looked at me idly. "If you're smart, you'll blow this town," he said. "And fast. You really have no other recourse."

"Yes," I said bitterly. It was beginning to sink in. I'd been suckered by a weird kind of badger game. "Yes, I guess you're right."

But I didn't move. I kept looking from one to the other of them. Her eyes were gleaming as her

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hands shuffled the money. She began putting it into that big bag.

"Just a moment, darling," he said. "Five thousand of that is mine."

"Carl," she said in a wheedling voice.

"Give me the five," he said.

"So you stake her, too," I said with the bitterness still in my voice.

"Of course," he said.

She came to the side of his chair and tucked the five grand into his coat pocket. She gave him the .32, dropping it in on top of the money. She sat down on the arm of his chair, her arm across his shoulders. They both looked at me.

"You'd better get going," he said.

My mind was running frantically around the edges of the problem. I knew I was caught. There was no way out. He could shoot me and get away with it. He could put me in jail. I had broken into his house with a gun in my pocket, and she would back him up all the way. It was as pretty a trap as a stupid man could ever walk into.

"All right," I said. "I'm on my way."

I began walking toward the door. I knew this was a place where my gift of talking wouldn't do a bit of good. This was no place for a talker to be. Then I stopped. I turned and looked at them. They made a cozy domestic picture, except for the gun in his hand. Her arm was across his shoulders and her fingers were riffling his hair.

"Sheriff," I said. "I hope she never tells you how far she had to go to get me to do the job." I saw him stiffen.

I went on very quickly. "You know, some men will kill," I said. "But most men will not kill for money alone. It takes love, too."

I was gone, then, fast out the front door and down the walk. I began to run when I hit the sidewalk and I did not stop until I had reached the car.

As I started the motor, I heard the first shot.

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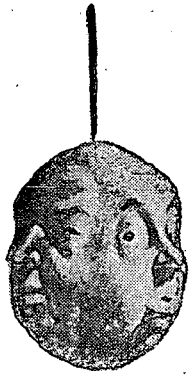

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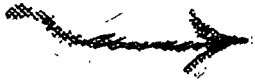

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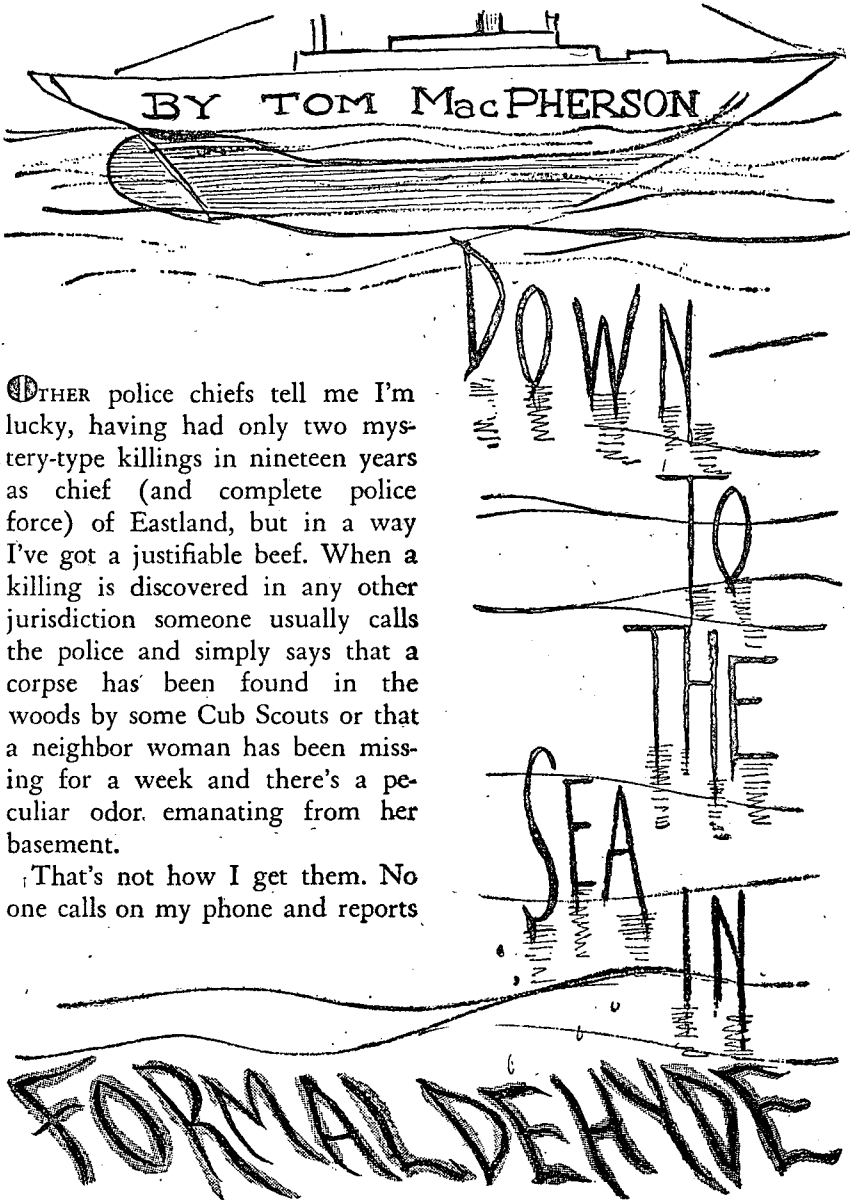

OTHER police chiefs tell me I'm lucky, having had only two mystery-type killings in nineteen years as chief (and complete police force) of Eastland, but in a way I've got a justifiable beef. When a killing is discovered in any other jurisdiction someone usually calls the police and simply says that a corpse has been found in the woods by some Cub Scouts or that a neighbor woman has been missing for a week and there's a peculiar odor emanating from her basement.

That's not how I get them. No one calls on my phone and reports

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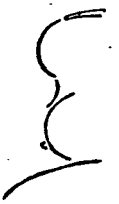
There is a well-worn jest about the absent-minded professor who built a boat in his barn, and had to tear down the latter in order to launch the former. Try it for size in this story.



that a body has been found. With me they have to play guessing games.

My first case was when Larry Stubbs found Roberta Rinehart floating face down in Lindy's Lake. Larry was born a deaf-mute, but for the previous several months had been learning to speak from his diaphragm. Birdie Willets had seen Larry running into my office and she trotted in behind him. It was Birdie who had taught Larry the sign language when he was young.

Larry could have finger-talked his report in four seconds and Birdie could have given me a simultaneous translation which the U.N. folks would have admired. If you have ever seen two deaf mutes finger-talking you know how rapidly they can communicate. But Larry shook off Birdie like a junkball pitcher shaking off his catcher's signals. Larry had learned to talk from the diaphragm and he was determined to "talk". He did, too. It took forty-five minutes, and by the last five minutes I was understanding his words three at a streak. Trouble was, by the time I finally understood where he'd found Roberta, Helmut Hayes walked in and owned up to being the cause.

Helmut claimed it was an accident and that he was afraid it wouldn't look like one, so he laid low hoping Roberta wouldn't ever be found. He got a jury to believe enough of his accident defense to let him off with manslaughter, but for a long spell folks in other towns talked about Eastland's "American Tragedy." What Eastland folks talked about was how a "couple of dummies" solved the case by sitting out Helmut Hayes until he surrendered.

Now, four years later, Birdie walked in alone to report my second capital crime. Most experienced police can tell by how a party approaches whether he or she is just socializing or wants road directions or has a heap of trouble to discuss. Birdie knew all the roads hereabouts and she confines her socializing to other elderly talkative women. I could see the excitement tugging at her jawbones

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and right away I was worried. Like so many women who have no man around, Birdie talks a powerful long time before getting around to the pertinent details.

"You know that Root Fenisong who lives in the old Benson cottage?" Birdie began, and that was the last time she was on the subject of Fenisong for ten or twelve minutes. We went through a genealogical history of the Bensons, or rather, Birdie went through their family history. Her hands were working pretty near as hard as her tongue. I got to suspecting one reason why Birdie, who has never been accused of having defective speech, took the trouble to learn the deaf-and-dumb language. With it she could talk twice as much at one oration. If there had been a language you could speak with feet, I'm sure Birdie would have mastered that, too. I sort of imagined her sitting in that metal porch chair I keep for visitors, tongue, feet, and hands all in motion.

"What are you grinning about, Will Hare? Is murder funny to you?"

"Murder! Who? Oh, yes, at the Bensons."

"Bensons! Good grief, chief, haven't you been listening? The Bensons left Eastland years ago. It's Root Fenisong—or at least someone who was out at Fenisong's, which is the old Benson place. Root lives there, not the Bensons . . ."

It took maybe another six or seven minutes, what with my having to pull Birdie back to the subject every few hundred words, but the way it finally pieced together was this: Birdie was walking past Fenisong's cottage and had noticed a couple of dogs running in and out the front door. Root loved women and hated dogs, so Birdie figured he had gone off and left the door open unintentionally. She shooed away the dogs and when she stepped up onto the porch to close the door she saw a large quantity of blood spattered on the porch deck. She peered inside and found the kitchen pretty much stirred up, with food and dishes scattered around the floor.

While Birdie's talk wandered off among the Civil War generation of Bensons, I got the First Aid Squad on the telephone and after that called Doc Withers. Neither had been called on to treat Fenisong or anyone else out at his place. I gathered up notebook, camera, and Birdie, and we drove the half mile out to the Benson—that is, the Fenisong cottage.

Birdie looked downright chagrined when we traipsed upon and around that clean-as-a-whistle

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porch. We knocked on the door, loud and official like, then opened it and walked in. No sign of Root. There was no debris cluttering the kitchen floor, but the table looked as though someone had rushed out without finishing breakfast.

Birdie got over being sheepish. She was belligerent.

"Huh-well! This place *was* all littered. The door *was* open. And there *was* blood on that porch!"

I told Birdie that I believed her. For one thing, that porch had been scrubbed with strong soap within the past hour, and I knew Root never bothered to keep it washed. He might sweep it once or twice in a season, but he never let any water other than rainwater fall on it.

Birdie pursed her lips, then parted them with a soft smacking sound. "How could anybody have gotten that floor so sparkling clean in so short a time?" It was more housewifely admiration than curiosity.

I debated with myself whether to tell her how much time someone had to clean up the mess, but I let it pass. It must have taken Birdie at least ten minutes to reach my office after finding bloodstains on Root's porch. Even at her rapid waddle, I could not imagine Birdie making the half mile in less than ten minutes. Allow another twenty minutes before she completed her mixed genealogical-foul play report and I had checked the first aid squad and Eastland's only GP. Someone had more than half an hour for a quick scrub job on the porch. That someone must have picked the food scraps and other stuff off the kitchen floor to remove evidence of a struggle. Either the someone didn't think it necessary to tidy up the kitchen any further, or Birdie and I had been spotted soon enough for said someone to get out of sight. The big question was: did the someone know Birdie had been on the scene earlier, or had the someone missed Birdie in between carting off the victim and returning to erase evidence?

I'd done the last half of that wondering out loud, then asked Birdie, "What do you think? Did Fenisong do something homicidal-like to someone, or did someone do it to Fenisong?"

Birdie answered with a shrug of her shoulders. No hands, no tongue. Then, as though she suddenly remembered her dual accomplishment, her tongue clucked loose and she started waving both hands in my direction.

"You're being mighty pointed about not saying 'he' or 'him', Chief Hare. Just because the porch got its first scrubbing since the

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Bensons left are you trying to make out it was a woman who killed Root?"

Birdie seemed convinced that Fenisong was the victim, and I guess I felt the same. And both of us were equally sure that some woman was either cause or culprit. So, I asked Birdie the obvious question.

"You got any 'he' or 'him' you'd like to nominate?"

"The only 'he' or 'him' who might have a good reason to kill Fenisong isn't the violent type. Besides, he'd have every right to, if any man ever had a right to stamp out vermin. And you know as well as I do, chief, who that 'he' or 'him' is."

I did. Birdie was thinking of Marty Cortland. I hadn't been up to see Professor Cortland since Millie Cortland's funeral more than a week ago, and now I didn't enjoy the prospect of pumping him about Root Fenisong. Especially since most Eastland folks, including myself, were convinced that Root was the cause of Millie's suicide.

After I drove Birdie back to town I shooed her, telling her firmly that the rest was police business, and maybe wasn't even police business if it turned out that Root wasn't done in — that maybe he had cut his arm or leg or something, and had got himself a ride into Middleburg Hospital. I got rid of Birdie, but the phone call to the hospital was fifteen cents wasted. I checked again with the first aid squad and with Doc Withers, but neither had yet done any business with Fenisong or with anyone out at his cottage.

Having stalled all I could, I had to face going out and speaking to the professor. All the way out to the Cortland place I chewed myself out for not having gone out right after the funeral. I had started twice, but both times I merely got outside the office door when I decided I had some important duties somewhere else. Anywhere else. Fact is, I just didn't have the guts to witness what happens to a man like Marty Cortland after losing a woman like Millie.

They had both edged over forty before they got married, each for the first time. Millie had been one of those females just born to be a mother. An orphan herself at twenty, not poor but a comfortably-fixed orphan, Millie took to raising orphan boys two or three at a time. Not babies or toddlers. Millie took in the ten- and twelve-year-olds that married couples wouldn't take. She would have overlapping "families", sometimes with as many as six boys around the house. In twenty years she

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raised as many winners, no losers.

Folks had bragged that if Millie had been allowed to continue she would have produced a president from Eastland before long. But social legislation caught up with Millie. The county set standards for adoptions and the first requirement was that adoption be by married couples. That put spinster Millie out of business as an orphan raiser.

Her last "son" set out for Harvard, a genius at fifteen, and it looked like a lonely middle age coming up for Millie. Then Marty Cortland showed up in Eastland and asked to lease Millie's barn. Marty was on the faculty of the pre-med school at the State University, and he wanted a barn large enough to house the forty-foot schooner he intended to build. He said most boat-building projects got bogged down by weather. He wanted shelter over his schooner so that he could work weekends and holidays, winter and summer, without worrying about the elements.

He fixed up a corner to live in during the first summer school holiday, and pretty soon Millie began coming over to tidy up his housing corner and to see that he didn't forget his meals. She had raised enough males to know better than to tamper with his boat-building tools and parts. Before the first summer was over boatbuilding got interrupted in favor of honeymooning.

During the next three years work on the schooner was intermittent and the professor was on the receiving end of all the corny jokes about amateur boat builders. Millie was "lofting" and sewing sails, and there appeared to be no rush about that project, either. Then Root Fenisong arrived to lease the nearby Benson cottage.

It wasn't long before Root got a reputation for favoring women in variety. Many fathers and a few husbands got to using strong language when referring to Root, but if Fenisong had earned any of it at least he was being discreet enough not to have any females into his cottage overnight. I know, because I'm positive Birdie and her clique would have had me after him at his first slip.

Then the mess started. Millie Cortland began to drop in on Fenisong to bring him some precooked nourishment and to see that he had clean linens and such. When I tried an oblique approach on Marty to get him to stop Millie's visits—I used the "unfounded gossip" line—he dragged me out into the open and swatted me down, laughing at me as he did. He reminded me of how Millie's

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first crop of "sons" suffered some early gossip, then made the town proud of them. Finally he told me that it had been his suggestion that Millie look after Fenisong.

"Millie is the mother type," he said, not that it was necessary to tell me. "She can't adopt boys now as easily as she could years ago, and we are not likely to have any of our own. Women like Millie never get over the itch to be mothering someone. I sort of derailed her natural instincts by electing to become husband instead of son. Lately she has been having the mother itch bad, so I just steered her toward yon lone bachelor down the road. You don't ever have to worry about her, Will. Millie can cope with any situation. Everything is copasetic."

But everything didn't stay copasetic. One afternoon Millie staggered into my office, wild eyed and disheveled. After I got her settled in my old iron visitor's chair I poured her a half snort of whiskey. I did too successful a job of settling her nerves, for when she finished the whiskey she decided she had nothing to tell me. She tidied herself up, then permitted me to drive her home. She was silent on the way home, and somehow I couldn't break the silence.

She stayed away from Root Fenisong's cottage after that, and five weeks later she hanged herself.

Marty Cortland wasn't in the house when I got there, but I heard sawing noises coming from the barn. I walked over, relieved to find he was back working on the schooner. At first I couldn't see him. What I did see was a mammoth rectangle of lumber just inside the barn door. The sawing seemed to be coming from inside the wood pile.

"Hey, professor?"

"Yeah?" his voice answered from inside the lumber heap, then his head loomed up in the center. "Ladder's around the far side. Come on up."

I walked around the rectangle, noting it was several courses of two-by-twelve timbers, maybe about fifteen stacks laid side by side and rising about four feet high. When I climbed the ladder I saw that Marty was hollowing out the inside of the timber pile to the shape of a huge egg, one end blunted, the other drawing into a tapered edge. I asked was he fixing up a bathtub for King Kong.

"Nope," he answered, matter-of-factly. "I'm making a mold to pour a keel for the *Millie*. The book says I can't mold a keel this size, but I say I can."

"Oh?"

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"What does the 'oh' mean? Doubt me? Want me to explain how I plan to do what the book says can't be done?"

He was puffing a little as he put down the saw. I guess he wanted to encourage me to visit a while. I decided my business could wait, that's the kind of coward I am under certain conditions. Professor Martin Cortland would almost always be "certain conditions". Besides, the 'oh' escaped me when I heard a name for the boat for the first time and I was curious. It had always been 'she' or 'the tub'. Now it was 'Millie'.

The professor sat down on some of the sawn timbers and started to tell me how he was going to fox the book.

"This type of mold is not supposed to be sturdy enough for a keel of the size I intend to cast. But I can't see myself having it cast at a foundry and then get it trucked all the way out to here. I've got each of these two-by-twelves spiked solidly to the one below. Before I start pouring lead I'll tack sheets of one-inch plywood outside the planks and then bind the whole business with steel straps. That means I'll have to use some expensive materials, but I'll need most of the same items for later use anyway. Got it?"

"You going to try to pour hot lead into that do-it-yourself contraption?"

"Sure, but not all at one time. I'll rig up a melting pot right over the mold. I'll also throw a lot of unmelted scrap directly into the mold as I go along and let the stuff I melt flow around it." He stood up and hoisted himself up to the edge of the mold and stared at me for a while. Then he jarred me with his sudden change of tone and subject.

"Something's on your mind, Will."

Something was on my mind, but nothing much was on my backbone. I told him I thought Root Fenisong may have been hurt or killed or maybe Root had hurt or killed someone.

"That so?" he asked. Nothing more.

I explained how Birdie had gotten me out to Fenisong's place. I told him everything except the reason why I had come out to see him. I didn't ask him if he knew anything about Fenisong, and he didn't volunteer anything. It must have hurt him to hear Fenisong's name, so I quit there. If he had anything to tell me he would have done so. I asked a few polite and probably stupid questions about the keel, then left.

The next four days turned up no leads on Root Fenisong. None

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of the hospitals in the state had him, and he didn't return to his cottage. I checked all recent missing persons flyers, but found no one I could connect with Fenisong. Subconsciously I must have been hoping Fenisong was the culprit, not a victim, and was on the run. He seemed to have no known relatives or out-of-town friends. There might have been some female acquaintances, but none who were publicly upset over his sudden disappearance.

I dropped in on the professor every day and although I asked every leading question I could dream up, I never got the courage to ask him point blank whether he had any first hand knowledge about what might have happened on Root's porch. He kept adding tiers of two-by-twelves to the keel mold and shaping the bathtub effect inside. He didn't seem to object to my interruptions, perhaps because I gave him periodic excuses to rest.

It was the fifth evening after Birdie had come in to report the bloodstains on Fenisong's porch. I was munching on the Elite Restaurant's Pot Roast Special, when something began to nag at the back of my brain. I skipped dessert and went out to see Marty Cortland. There were lights burning in a few rooms but I couldn't raise the professor inside the house, so I went around to the boat barn.

The bathtub mold was now about eight feet high and there was a ramp running up to the top from just inside the barn doors. I climbed up the ramp with a little puffing effort and looked down into the mold. There was about two feet of lead in the bottom, with here and there some chunks of scrap metal protruding through the flat surface of the stuff the professor had melted and poured. Above the mold at the far end was a sixty-six gallon drum sitting over a jumbo-sized electric hot plate. There was a spigot low on the drum, with the faucet placed so that it would dribble molten lead right into the mold. A heavy pulley was rigged on the overhead rafters, and I figured the professor was using it to haul up the scrap and lead ingots. A heavy half-inch line ran through the pulley and the hook end rested on the base of the ramp.

I had just walked down the ramp when I heard a vehicle drive up. It was the professor in a pick-up truck. The body of the truck was stacked top heavy with an assortment of metal scrap and lead ingots.

"Doggone," I complained. "If I'd just gotten out two minutes sooner I wouldn't have to help you un-

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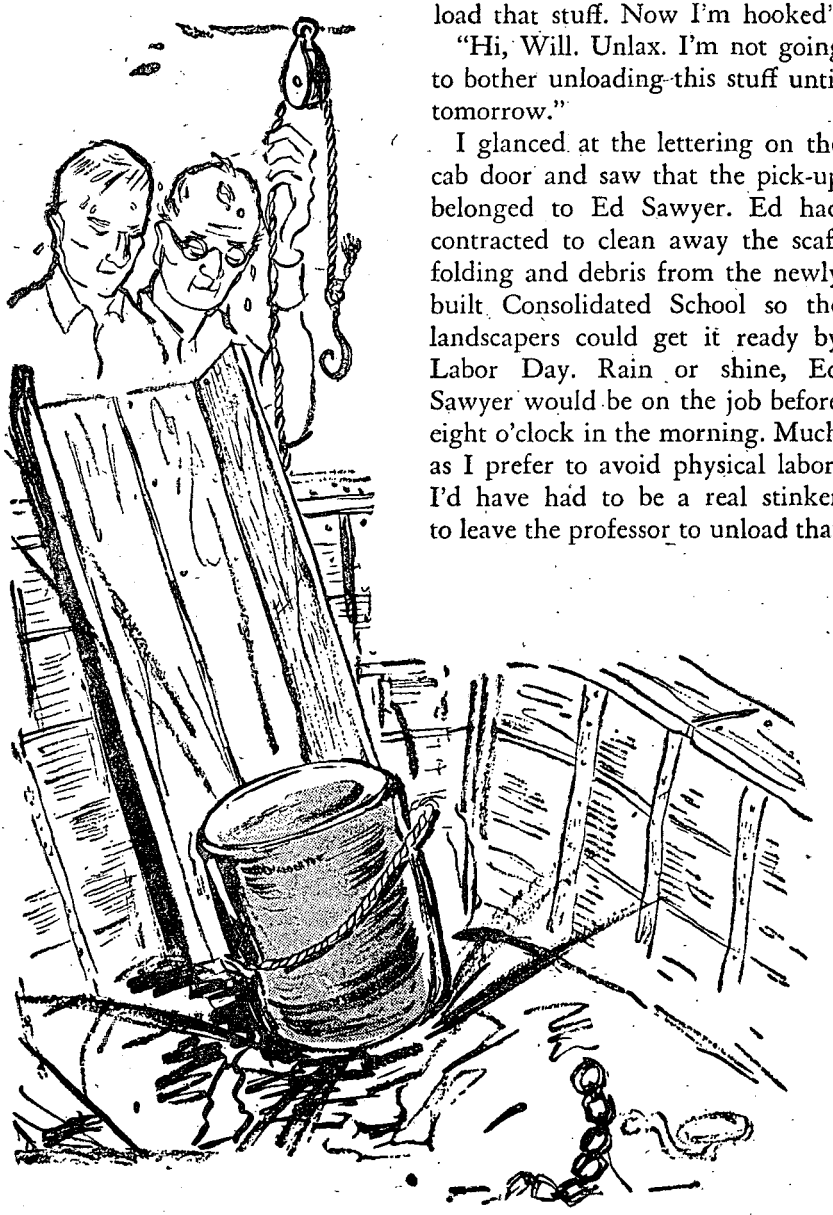

load that stuff. Now I'm hooked".

"Hi, Will. Unlax. I'm not going to bother unloading this stuff until tomorrow."

I glanced at the lettering on the cab door and saw that the pick-up belonged to Ed Sawyer. Ed had contracted to clean away the scaffolding and debris from the newly built Consolidated School so the landscapers could get it ready by Labor Day. Rain or shine, Ed Sawyer would be on the job before eight o'clock in the morning. Much as I prefer to avoid physical labor, I'd have had to be a real stinker to leave the professor to unload that

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truck all by himself. I grumbled.

"You'd crab for a year if I left you with that load," I told him. "So let's get busy."

He would have tried to talk me out of it, but I dropped the tailgate of the truck and hefted one of the lead ingots. The professor brought over his wheelbarrow and we transferred a half dozen ingots to it. He wheeled them around to the back of the mold while I walked the hook end of his hoist line around. By the time we had hoisted the first load of ingots up to the drum and got the electric stove switched on it was dark.

There were some old chain-link fenceposts standing up in the truck bed, leaning in toward the center, and odd pieces of sheet metal banked around them. When I tugged one of the posts loose, most of the scrap collapsed, revealing a large metal barrel. I climbed over the tangle of scrap and poked at the barrel. It was too heavy for me to move. I bent down and could just about read the faded "formaldehyde" stencilled near the top. When I turned to look for Marty he was standing at the foot of the ramp, watching me without any expression on his sweating face.

"This barrel is pretty heavy," I said. "How about making a sling and we'll hoist it off the truck bed and up the ramp."

He looped the end of the line into a sling, never taking his eyes off me and never saying a word. It took maybe half an hour to horse that barrel up to the top. When we pushed it over into the mold it hit with a dull thunk and I could hear some liquid seeping out.

"You had your supper yet?" I asked.

"Nope, and I'm getting hungry."

I volunteered to fix coffee and sandwiches and left him to feed ingots into his homemade smelter while I went into the kitchen. I had no trouble finding all the makings. The professor hadn't changed any of Millie's kitchen arrangements, and I knew where she kept her staples. I knew a lot about Millie's habits and at one time I was smug about how often I knew what she was thinking. What I didn't know right now, however, was how she might feel if she'd been around to see one of her boys go wrong after being a good cop for nearly twenty years.

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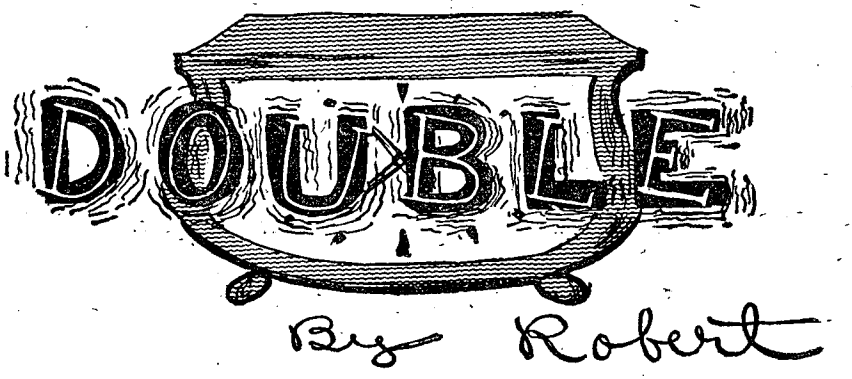
MR. DARBY lowered the .22 pistol and looked at the dresser clock. 7:17. Thirteen minutes before his regular awaking time. That thirteen minutes must now be used to take care of the few details that were not a part of his usual morning schedule. A few details, yes, but mighty important to his future security. He chuckled and allowed himself ten seconds to contemplate his handiwork with a judicious yet proud eye.

A .22 pistol is not noted for its noise, and when one fires a .22 through a bulky pillow the ensuing explosion is but a minor *pop!* And such a tidy little hole it makes, too. No mess. Mr. Darby was glad of that. He had a very orderly mind.

He set the pistol aside and went around his wife's bed, squatted down and lifted the blanket, folding it up on the bed just so. Then he unzipped the side of the mattress cover. His wife had never had much of an imagination . . . no more than any old maid who hides her money in her mattress. Mr. Darby had been married to Mrs. Darby for two years; and for one year he'd known exactly where she hid her money. Getting to the money had been the problem.

His wife had claimed to be an invalid—completely bedridden (a claim which Mr. Darby secretly doubted, but could not disprove as he was away at the office each day from 8:30 to 6:30; but he'd always suspected that his wife slipped out of bed after he left the house, and pottered around until his return). She'd led him a dog's life . . . always nagging, always complaining; forever making him wait on her hand and foot; up the stairs,



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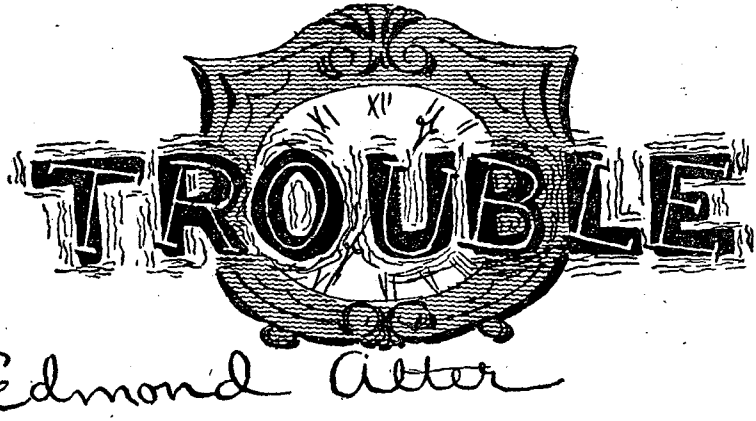
Our friend the door-to-door salesman is cast in a new role here, and is joined in the conspiracy by an observant neighbor, and by a cat. Mixed bag, I'd say, to mix a metaphor.

down the stairs; fetch this, take away that . . . And all the time he'd known that she was lolling her fat body on top of her money, and he hadn't been able to get to it. Not until this morning. Now she didn't have a word to say . . . not a word, and her silence was like tender music to his ears.

He reached inside the mattress and began drawing out plump packets of money; packets of fives, tens, twenties, fifties . . . There was no time to count it, no need, really. He knew she was rich, knew she didn't keep her money in a bank, and would have nothing to do with stocks and bonds. He'd known these facts *before* he married her. One does not marry a fat, disgusting, crabby old woman of fifty for love.

He fetched a briefcase from his closet and stacked the money neatly inside. Then—it was just 7:30—he went into the bathroom. He returned to the quiet bedroom with his toothbrush and razor, placed these articles in the briefcase and followed them with shorts and socks. That was all the traveling equipment he could safely afford to take. If he tried to leave the house with a suitcase his nosy



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neighbors would wonder, and he couldn't have that. It didn't matter; he would buy new clothes in Paris.

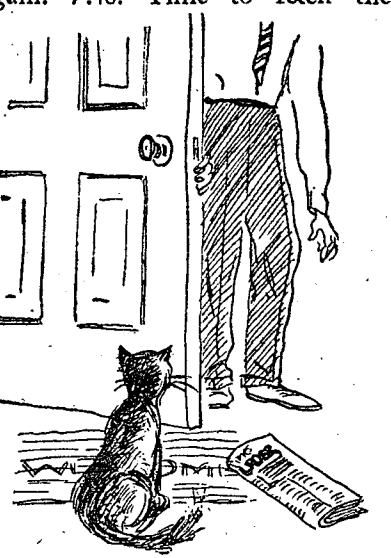
Dressed, he went to the door carrying the briefcase, but paused to look back at his wife's bed with a smile. "Have a nice rest, dear," he said solicitously.

Coming down the stairs Mr. Darby glanced at the hall clock—7:40—and nodded, as though confirming his unbreakable rule for punctuality. From now until he left the bus downtown at 8:50, everything must follow the exact time-pattern he'd adhered to each morning for the past two years. It wasn't for nothing that his neighbors said of him: "You can set your clock by Darby." And this morning, this very special morning, nothing must appear amiss; every minute must be accounted for, every second must be in its proper position in the Darby time-schedule.

The kitchen clock said 7:43 as Mr. Darby placed three limp strips of bacon on the pre-heated grill. But he checked himself, staring with a look of witlessness at what he'd done. He only ate *two* pieces of bacon in the morning . . . habit had placed the third strip for his wife. He giggled weakly, and shook his head, shocked by the slip. "I must watch that," he warned himself.

He made a very elaborate gesture in selecting *his* two eggs from the refrigerator.

His eggs frying, his toast toasting, he had his half-glass of prune juice and looked at the clock again. 7:48. Time to fetch the



morning paper and let Tabby in. He trotted down the hall, smiling to himself.

Letting Tabby in each morning always gave him a perverse pleasure. Mrs. Darby had been like Craig's wife—very meticulous about her home and furnishings, and she'd had no use at all for Tabby the cat, complaining that "the filthy little beast" shed fur-

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balls. So every morning, without a word said to his wife, Mr. Darby would let Tabby inside the house. A minor rebellion against his wife's tyranny, one that had given him many a secret chuckle.

M. Darby went out on the front porch, picked up the rolled newspaper, and called softly, "Tabby-tabby-tabby."

His next door neighbor, the widow Reese, looked up from her weeding and smiled at him, but glanced at her wrist watch before she spoke. "Why, Mr. Darby," she called. "Either you're two minutes early this morning, or I'm two minutes slow."

As a rule Mr. Darby felt offended by Mrs. Reese's chiding remarks concerning his punctuality; but this morning he welcomed the observation. Still—it was vexing to think that something might have gone wrong with his clocks and that he *was* two minutes ahead of his schedule. A little thing like that might call unwanted attention to him. But no . . . it was more likely that Mrs. Reese's watch was slow, and he said as much.

"I'm afraid it must be your watch, Mrs. Reese. I check my clocks at night with the telephone operator . . . they're electric, you know."

Mrs. Reese nodded. "If I know you, Mr. Darby, you're right. Correct time is one thing we can *always* count on you for."

Tabby, sleek and low to the ground, scooted from a hedge and made a bee-line through the front doors. Mrs. Reese, following the hurried movement, smiled again. "Tabby is certainly *your* pet, Mr. Darby," she said, and something about her smile and the look in her eyes seemed to suggest to Mr. Darby that she understood his ordeal.

Mr. Darby glanced at his own wrist watch—7:51—and said, "Excuse me now, Mrs. Reese . . . my eggs are just about done."

He hurried back to the kitchen, saved his eggs from a crisp fate, gave the mewing cat her saucer of milk, and took his breakfast into the dining room. The dining room clock said it was 7:55 precisely as Mr. Darby tucked his napkin into his collar.

He had finished his breakfast—8:10—and had just started to unroll his morning paper when the hall phone rang. Frowning, Mr. Darby left the table and went into the hall.

"Hello, Darb?" the voice said in his ear. "Didn't wake you up, did I?" Then the voice laughed and said something to someone else that Mr. Darby couldn't catch.

He wasn't really surprised by the call; in fact, he'd been half-

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expecting it. Smitty, an office clerk, always got such a boot out of ribbing him about his punctuality.

"No, no, Smitty," Mr. Darby said. "I was just having breakfast."

The voice laughed again. "That's just what I told the gang, Darb. I said: 'Even on his vacation old Darb will be sticking to that time-schedule like glue.' And was I right!"

Mr. Darby forced an unnecessary smile. "Yes, that's right. I'm always on schedule."

"Well, Darb, have a nice two weeks, hear? Plenty of time for you to do all the housework, eh? Lots of dusting and polishing and cleaning, eh, Darb? Ho-ho! See you in a couple of weeks, boy!"

Mr. Darby put the phone down and looked around at the quiet house.

"That's what you think," he murmured. "I've cleaned this place for the last time."

He started back to his newspaper feeling very pleased with himself. His neighbors had no idea that his vacation commenced that morning. When he left the house at 8:30 they'd think he was off to work as usual. Not one of them would have the least concern for him until they noticed he hadn't returned home at 6:30. By 7:30 they might even begin to wonder about him; and by 8:30 they'd probably begin to worry over his sudden pattern-break. And possibly by 9:30 they would even come to his house to inquire—maybe phone the police.

It didn't matter. When he left the bus downtown he was going to take a taxi to the airport, and there catch the 9:20 flight to New York. From the International Airport he would take the 10:30 flight to Paris. At the earliest possible time that the police could discover his wife . . . he would be setting down in Europe. After that—the selection of a new name, the purchase of a false passport, and . . . the vanishing point!

When the doorbell rang it was as though someone had slipped up behind him and shouted BOO! in his ear. Mr. Darby dropped his paper and looked at the clock with a sort of wild fear. 8:21. What fool would be ringing his doorbell at this time of morning? Why?

He pushed back his chair and hurried to the front door.

A smiling man greeted him on his own porch. The man held an open box in one hand that was neatly packed with an array of brushes and weird-looking tools; in the other hand a heavy bag with the trade-name stamped in gold letters.

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"Mr. Darby? I have your order here, sir."

Mr. Darby blinked. "My order?"

"Yes, your brushes . . . or rather your wife's. Heh-heh."

Mr. Darby felt very dense. "My wife's?"

The brushman's smile turned hesitant. "Yes, sir. The brushes your wife ordered from me last week."

Mr. Darby looked at his watch. 8:22.

"I don't understand," he said absently. "How could she order any brushes? She's an invalid, bedridden."

The brushman's smile was now a doubtful looking thing. He glanced at the house-numerals on the mailbox as though checking his bearings, then pulled a paper from his coatpocket.

"But you *are* Mr. Darby, aren't you? I have her order here: one sink brush—nylon; one hairbrush — nylon; one hand-lotion — Blue Memory; one deodorant — Pinescent . . . It's all for a Mrs. Elmo Darby. She met me right here at the door last week . . . uh-Monday, I think."

So it was true! The thing he'd suspected all along. His wife had not been an invalid. Mr. Darby raged inwardly. Two years of tyranny; waiting on her like a slave, housecleaning on Sundays, cooking her meals, fetching and carrying, ever up-the-stairs-down-the-stairs . . . He was almost sorry now that he hadn't awakened her just before he had . . .

8:23.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Darby snapped, and made to close the door. "We don't want it."

The brushman gawked at him. "Not want it, sir? But your wife ordered the things, Mr. Darby. Perhaps if I might see Mrs. Darby for a moment . . ."

Mr. Darby started. "Do what? No! *Oh no!* You can't see her . . . she's sleep . . . uh-eating her breakfast . . . she's still in bed." He glanced at his watch again. His behavior was too erratic, he knew. The brushman would begin to think something was wrong with him. Pattern-pattern-pattern. Nothing must look amiss. There was still time to take care of this man calmly and then get on with the schedule.

"How much is the bill?" Mr. Darby asked.

The brushman's smile was on firm ground again. He looked at the bill. "Well, let's see here, Mr. Darby . . . it all totals to four-twenty-one. That's the tax too, you understand. That's . . ."

"Yes, yes." 8:24. Mr. Darby reached for his wallet . . . but stalled, remembering where all his

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money was. "Just a moment, please," he mumbled. He hurried back into the dining room and opened the briefcase, his fingers fumbling and snatching for a packet of money.

The brushman's mouth dropped a bit when he looked at the bill Mr. Darby had handed him. "A fifty-dollar bill? I don't know that I can make change for . . ."

Mr. Darby almost let his groan be heard. He'd thought it was a five. He snatched the fifty back, saying, "Just a moment. I have more—I mean, I have smaller."

8:26 the dining room clock informed him as he fumbled through the packets of money again. "I must get ahold of myself," he hissed desperately. "The man will think I'm balmy." He almost ran back to the front door.

How could one man be as slow as the brushman was counting out the change? Mr. Darby wanted to strangle him.

"Four-twenty-one out of five, yes, sir. And fifty cents makes four-seventy-one, and a quarter makes four-ninety-six, and let's see . . . one penny, two pennies, three pennies . . . that's four-ninety-nine . . . let's see, must have another penny here somewhere in all this . . ."

Mr. Darby put his empty hand to his face to rub his features out of whack. 8:28. "It's all right," he said. "Forget the penny."

"No, no. Have it right here, sir. There you are—*oops!* Almost dropped it. There; that makes five, and thank you, Mr. Darby."

"Yes, yes, that's all right. 'Bye." Mr. Darby closed the door.

Immediately the brushman knocked on it.

Mr. Darby slapped his forehead, then collected himself and opened the door again. The brushman was smiling at him hesitantly, holding out a fat package. "You forgot to take your order, Mr. Darby."

Finally the door was closed. Mr. Darby was inside with the package of brushes that would never be used, and the brushman was gone.

8:30.

Mr. Darby snatched up his briefcase, snatched his hat, cleared his throat, adjusted his tie, and opened the front door. He stepped onto the porch, closing the door behind him for the last time.

Everything was all right now. He was still right on schedule . . . a little excited, but he'd walk that off. He started down the driveway, clipping along at his usual "time's - passing - don't - waste - it" stride.

Mrs. Reese looked up smiling. "My watch will be correct now, Mr. Darby. 8:30 sharp. I can always set it by you."

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Mr. Darby smiled, walking on. "Did your dear wife enjoy her breakfast this morning, Mr. Darby?" she called after him. "How's her pain?"

Mr. Darby's sense of humor cost him four seconds. He paused and looked back. "I gave her a very special breakfast this morning," he said. "She's feeling no pain at all."

The clock in the administration building of the airport said 10:15 as the passengers for the Paris flight started filing through the gate. Mr. Darby was feeling very good, very good indeed. He felt as though he had all the time in the world. All his problems, his fears, seemed trivial now. He felt so good he didn't even look twice at the man in overcoat and snap-brim who was checking the passengers' papers.

But when Mr. Darby held out his ticket and stamped passport, the man in the overcoat and snap-brim held out his wallet—showing Mr. Darby a shiny metal badge.

"You'll have to come with me. Mr. Darby. I'm arresting you on suspicion of murder." Perhaps he said more than that, but if he did Mr. Darby missed it. His brain was a whirligig running wild.

"How—how—" he sounded like an Indian greeting strangers as the detective led him off, "—how could you've found out so soon?"

The detective couldn't seem to keep his smile down. "You and your wife were certainly methodical people, Mr. Darby. Never a moment's variance in your daily schedules."

"In *our* schedules? What schedule did my wife have?"

"Didn't you know?" The detective seemed more amused than ever. "Well, at 7:49 each morning you'd bring in the paper and cat. Could set your watch by it, Mrs. Reese, your neighbor, said. Then at 8:30 you'd leave the house for work. And at 8:40 your wife would open the front door and throw the cat outside."

"But this morning Mrs. Darby *didn't* throw the cat out; so Mrs. Reese became worried—knowing your wife was a sick woman—and went over to your house to investigate; and so . . ."

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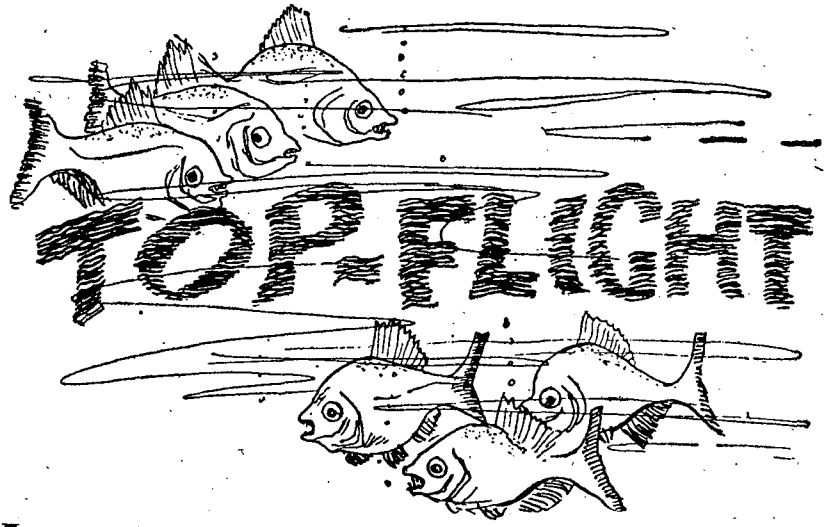

JIMMY stood in the lobby of the *Hotel Pacific,* looking down at the steady stream of cars heading west on Wilshire Boulevard. Every so often a big convertible or a brisk sports model would race by, the driver tanned and comfortably bored behind the wheel. It was after dinner and dark, with a breeze, sharp and salty, from the ocean.

Jimmy watched the silent glide of cars wistfully. That's pretty nice living, he thought. Have yourself a lobster in one of those open-air restaurants that lean over the sea, and then take a blanket and lay on the sand with your wife and kids. Real nice, with the wind coming in off the water and all the money in the world.

He turned away from the glass doors and glanced around the empty lobby. It was only nine o'clock, but the hotel seemed hushed and deserted. These people must go to bed right after dinner, he thought. Nothing else to do but eat and sleep. He turned back to the door and studied his reflection in the dark glass. It showed a tall, austere-looking man, fifty-five or six, with thinning white hair. The visored cap and the blue uniform fit perfectly; he looked like an airline pilot or a naval officer.

Jimmy watched the cars again, humming softly under his breath. This was his first week as a doorman at the *Hotel Pacific.* They didn't pay much for the evening man, but it was better than the odd-jobs he had been doing, or running an elevator in a downtown hotel. He had seen the ad in the paper and

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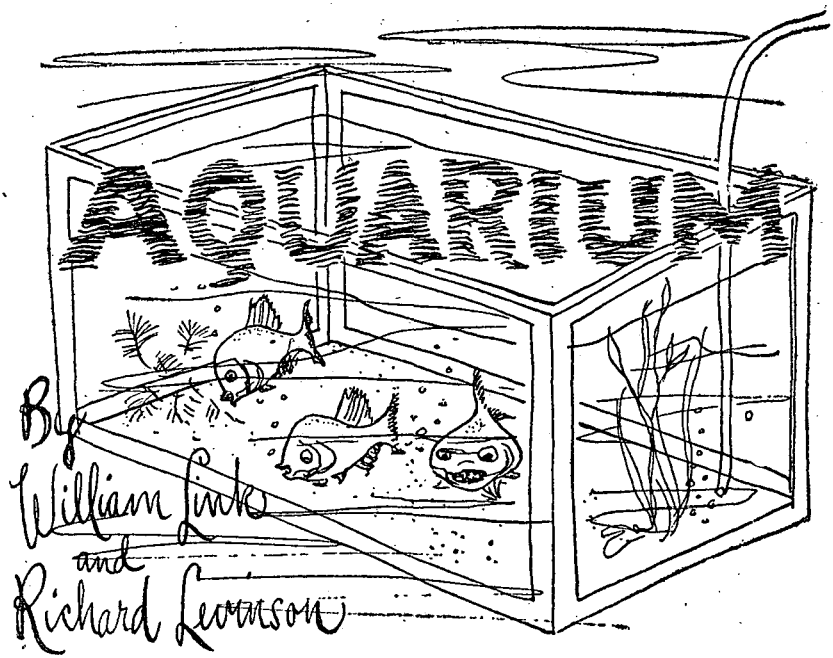

telephoned for an interview. The superintendent's name was Mr. King, and he needed someone immediately. His former doorman, a young fellow, had simply not come to work, and Mr. King was determined to hire someone older and more reliable to replace him. Fortunately, Jimmy was the right age and the uniform was the right size.

The cars were still moving along Wilshire in the warm darkness. Jimmy speculated on them rather sadly, his head slightly bent, his hands clasped behind his back. He had lost out long ago, a victim of the vast indifference of circumstance. There wasn't much to look forward to, no wife for companionship and no money for simple indulgences. Just Social Security and a one-room walk-up in Santa Mon-

I am constantly amazed by the collector's mania. There are those who collect match-folders, or buttons, or rocks, or shells. Then there are those who collect scalps, heads, and even more cumbersome objects. De gustibus non est disputandum.

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ica. Oh, well, he reflected, it could be worse. Better certainly, but it could be worse.

He walked across the lobby and looked through the glass wall into the courtyard. The apartments were built on three sides around a little green island of vegetation containing a swimming pool. The

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shrubbery was lit by pale violet floodlights and the pool was illuminated brightly from below.

Jimmy stopped and squinted, touching his spectacles. Someone was standing in the courtyard, bent over an oval fishpond near the pool. Who the devil would be watching the goldfish at this hour, he wondered. Perhaps it was somebody who had had too much to drink.

He opened the door quietly and walked around the shrubbery toward the pond. As he moved closer he could make out the figure of a woman. She was crouched down, whispering to the water. In her hand was a small goldfish bowl and she was dipping a mesh net into the pond.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Jimmy said.

The woman swung around, startled. "Who's there?" she said.

Jimmy went over to her. She was peering at him in the blue darkness, her eyes focusing behind thick glasses. She seemed to be in her mid-sixties, with a dry face and softly-shining gray hair. "Who are you?" she asked.

"New doorman, ma'am. May I ask what you're doing?"

"Why, I'm taking my goldfish back," she said, indicating the bowl. Three fish swam in the water.

"Well, now, I'm sorry," said Jimmy gently, "but those fish are Mr. King's property. He wouldn't like any of the tenants taking them."

The old woman smiled. "I guess I should explain. These goldfish are mine. I usually put them in the pond with Mr. King's when I visit my sister in San Francisco."

Jimmy frowned at her. "I don't understand."

"It's a very simple arrangement. Mr. King feeds his fish every day. When I'm away I leave mine in the

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pool so they get fed with the others."

"Oh," said Jimmy, feeling a little foolish, "I didn't know that." He touched his cap. "Sorry to bother you, ma'am."

"Perfectly all right. I realize I must have looked as if I was stealing them. I just got back from San Francisco this evening and I wanted to take them in before it gets too cold."

"I wouldn't think they're that sensitive, ma'am."

The old woman hugged the bowl protectively. "Well, they're not, really. But I like to pamper mine."

Jimmy leaned against the rim of the pond and took out his pipe. "I used to own a few myself," he said thoughtfully. "They died, though. I came home from work one day and they were floating on top of the water. Probably didn't get enough oxygen."

"That's terrible," she gasped. "You should have put a water plant in their bowl. That gives them all the oxygen they need." She looked at him suspiciously. "Did you feed them every day?"

"Every day, ma'am. I guess it was the lack of a water plant."

The old woman nodded solemnly. Then she picked up her net. "Well, it's time to feed them. Good night."

"Good night," said Jimmy. "Sorry I startled you before."

She smiled vaguely at him and went off along the patio, holding the bowl tightly against her breast.

Jimmy lit his pipe and watched her enter the building. Nice old lady, he thought. Probably lives all alone with her goldfish. He grew pensive, remembering the elderly people he had seen with dogs or cats. People get old, they need company, he decided. Humans or animals, it doesn't make any difference. As long as they have something to take care of.

A light blinked on in the top floor of the building. A moment later the old woman moved across the window, carrying her precious bowl. Jimmy sighed and sat down on the stone edge of the pond, puffing absently on his pipe. Maybe I ought to pick up a few goldfish again, he thought. They're nice to come home to in the evening, give a touch of color to the place.

When the light went out Jimmy returned to the lobby. He knocked his pipe against an ashtray and went back to the glass doors to watch the cars heading toward the ocean.

Jimmy saw the old woman occasionally during the following weeks. Sometimes, at night, she

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would sit near the pond, inspecting the goldfish and tilting her head to catch the ocean breezes. Jimmy would join her, smoking his pipe, and they would chat for a few minutes in the darkened courtyard. The old lady always left early to feed her fish.

Every once in a while, there were long stretches when he wouldn't see her at all. When he asked about her, Mr. King told him she was visiting her sister in San Francisco, and during these absences he would check the pond to see if she had left her fish with the others. They were always there, larger than the rest, swimming together in an aristocractic group of their own.

One evening, Jimmy was in the lobby when she came through the doors from the street. She was wearing a shabby black coat and she looked tired and irritable.

"Anything wrong, ma'am?" Jimmy asked politely.

"Just a little angry with myself. I went all the way to North Hollywood to buy some food for my goldfish, but the store wasn't open. I forgot that it closes on Fridays at six."

"Do you have enough to last over the weekend?"

The woman nodded wearily. "Yes. I'm sure there is plenty."

"You must feed them the best," said Jimmy, trying to cheer her up. "They certainly look healthy enough."

She nodded again, and Jimmy noticed that she didn't seem to be listening very carefully. Her eyes were on the dark street beyond the glass doors. "Jimmy," she said suddenly, "I'll be going up to visit my sister again soon, but I'm worried."

"Worried, ma'am?"

"I've been reading the papers lately about all those robberies along Wilshire. A lot of valuable things were stolen, even from hotels."

"I don't think there's any danger of that happening here," he said reassuringly.

"I know. But I can't help feeling that someone might break in while I'm away."

Jimmy laughed. "What could they take, ma'am? A few goldfish? You can always buy more of those."

The woman shook her head. "I have some things worth taking. That's the trouble."

Jimmy studied her. "Really?"

"My late husband was comfortably off. He left me some lovely things. Jewelry, silver. I have an original Cezanne." Her eyes lowered. "Now you're the only one who knows that besides my sister."

"They're insured, aren't they?"

"No. I never seem to get around to it."

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Jimmy removed his pipe and packed it very carefully. "You ought to insure them, ma'am. I mean, the chances are pretty slim that someone would rob you, but you never know."

"That means I have to get them appraised first, doesn't it?"

"I guess so."

The old woman frowned. "I don't like that. Some strange man looking through my things. Still, it's wiser to be protected . . ."

Jimmy lit the pipe and watched her over the bowl. She stood thinking for a moment, then she walked to the door leading to the patio. She was about to go in when she turned. "Jimmy."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Would you do me a favor and keep an eye out the next time I visit my sister? Just check my door at night to see if it's locked. I'd appreciate it very much."

"Don't you worry, ma'am. I'll be happy to take care of it."

"Thank you," she said. "Good night, Jimmy."

"Night."

She moved slowly through the courtyard and into the building. A minute later the light went on, a yellow square in the violet shadows.

Jimmy smoked his pipe and concentrated on the window. A thought was growing in the back of his mind that he didn't like. He tried to think of other things, but the thought kept gnawing at his consciousness. Jewelry and an expensive painting in the old lady's apartment. All of it accessible and unprotected.

He grunted, angry at himself, and glanced away. What am I? he thought. A sneak thief? He looked up again and saw the window was still lit, bright and inviting. Uninsured jewelry. A French painting worth thousands. His teeth tightened on the pipe stem. It was impossible. How could the old woman have such valuable possessions? But why not? Her husband had been wealthy; they had probably lived in one of those elegant homes in Beverly Hills. After his death the house had been too large, too full of memories. She had moved into a small apartment, taking her goldfish and her Cezanne.

The window went dark. The foliage rustled in the courtyard, throwing high shadows against the building. It would really be very simple, Jimmy thought, mulling over the idea. All I'd have to do is wait until she visits her sister again. I can tell when she goes because she'll leave her goldfish in the pond. Then I'd go up to her apartment without qualms and open it with my house key . . .

It was ridiculous. What would he

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do with a French painting? Who, would be insane enough to buy it? Still, there were probably outlets for such things. And the jewelry wouldn't be hard to get rid of, even though he'd have to sell it at a loss.

Jimmy smiled. Well, nothing like a daydream to revive the spirit and shield off loneliness. Sure, he'd rob the old woman, run away with her silver and jewelry and priceless French master. Of course. He laughed out loud and walked to the glass doors that overlooked Wilshire Boulevard. Jimmy, he thought humorously, you're a wicked man to be thinking such things.

The cars were moving endlessly out toward the sea. The limousines and the wire-wheeled sports models. Jimmy stared at them. How much jewelry would it take to buy a new convertible? He leaned against the glass, his head swimming with astronomical figures, while he gazed at the cars. Suddenly they seemed like goldfish, glittering and darting in a thin, dark stream.

The following Monday Jimmy woke in the early afternoon and went out for something to eat. Instead of returning to his apartment for his usual nap, he boarded a bus and rode through Beverly Hills along Wilshire Boulevard. It was a gray, overcast day, windless and hot. The bus rumbled past the muted glass facade of the *Hotel Pacific* and he rose to get off at the next corner.

The courtyard was colorless in the mid-afternoon haze, its shrubbery drained and pallid-looking. Jimmy skirted the swimming pool and went toward the pond. A maid, coming from one of the ground apartments, called to him. "Hi, Jimmy."

He waved, but he didn't stop to talk. The water in the pond was very still, and little shadows moved quietly in the depths like secret minnows. The old lady's goldfish were near the bottom, swimming in a tight cluster. Jimmy looked up at her window and saw that the shades were drawn. She must have left this morning for Frisco, he thought. Probably won't be back 'till the end of the week. He trailed his fingers through the warm water, thinking. Then he climbed the stairs to her apartment and rang the bell. No one came. He knocked on the door loudly, but there was no answer from inside.

And then, quite suddenly, he realized with a start of surprise that he actually intended to rob the place. Well, why not? Hadn't it been on his mind all along? Opportunity was too close to ignore; for the first time in his life all his

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desires, the vague and wistful longings, could be satisfied. And the price lay a few feet away behind the door. A moment later he had a plan worked out, simple and absolutely safe. He smiled as he headed for the stairs.

He took the bus to his own apartment and rested until five o'clock. Then he strolled to the corner drugstore and dialed a number on the pay phone.

"Hello?" said a heavy voice.

"This is Jimmy, Mr. King," he said.

"What is it, Jimmy?"

"I'm afraid I won't be able to come in tonight, sir. I've been having some terrible cramps."

"Damn it," Mr. King said. "This is awful short notice."

"I know, but they just started to bother me."

"Well, maybe you'll feel better tonight. Might just be an upset stomach."

Jimmy paused. "No, I . . . I don't think so. I haven't been up to snuff for a week now, Mr. King. I think I may need a good checkup at the hospital."

"How long's that gonna take?"

"I don't know, sir."

Mr. King sounded irritated. "Okay, Jimmy, I'll get somebody for tomorrow night. Trouble is, nobody will be on tonight."

"I'm sorry, Mr. King."

"That's okay. You take care of yourself."

Jimmy hung up. There was still a problem, a big one. He needed a car, it was a necessity. He couldn't get on a bus with a painting under his arm. He'd have to rent a car just for the evening.

In downtown Los Angeles he ate a small dinner and walked to the nearest office of a Rent-A-Car garage. He signed papers, paid a deposit, and drove off the lot in a convertible with wire-spoked wheels. It was an extravagant choice, but it seemed an appropriate one under the circumstances. He joined the other cars on Wilshire and shot out to the green tip of the Pacific. It was warm twilight now, and the sky seemed to have opened wide over the beach. Riding with the top down in a rush of other sleek machines, he felt as if he was a member of a powerful new fraternity. He raced the car to eighty, then checked his excitement and braked to a legal sixty. This was not the night to be detained for speeding.

It was a few minutes after eleven when he parked near the *Hotel Pacific*. The lobby gleamed emptily, its doors closed for the night. He walked cautiously around to the back and entered the courtyard. There were no lights visible in any of the apartments. Moonlight made

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a round white coin of the little pond. Well, he thought, this is it. And if anyone catches me I'll just say I'm checking for the old lady.

He entered the building and quietly climbed the tile stairs. He halted at the top and listened. Everything was perfectly silent, not even the late night talk of a television set. He edged up to the door and leaned against it, waiting. Then he rang the bell, just in case, but the chimes echoed hollowly from inside the apartment. He inserted his house key and turned the lock, waiting again to see if anyone had heard the sound. Then he touched the door and it swung slowly open.

At first glance he thought he had come to the wrong apartment. There was no furniture in the living room, only large glass cases glimmering faintly in the moonlight. Puzzled, he closed the door behind him and looked around.

Hundreds of tiny, flat eyes seemed to examine him from behind the glass walls. There were stacked tiers of aquariums, rows of them, all containing tropical fish. He had never seen so many different species, so many bizarre colors rippling in the dull light. Most of them were small, with strong jaws and sharp teeth. They spun lazily through the water, bright spirals of bronze and blue.

But there's nothing else here, he thought. No painting, no silverware, just a bed and these hundreds of fish. Why had she told him that story about the Cezanne and the silver and jewelry? The palms of his hands suddenly felt very cold. What about the doorman before him, the young fellow? Hadn't he phoned in to Mr. King one afternoon and never returned?

Jimmy steadied himself against one of the glass cases. Everything had been planned for him. The conversations with the old lady, the fake trip to San Francisco, the lure of valuable things. He looked down at the fish swimming in the heated water. All of them were plump and well-fed. He remembered hearing somewhere about a fish called the Piranha, a creature so voracious, and with such sharp teeth . . .

Then he heard the door opening softly behind him.

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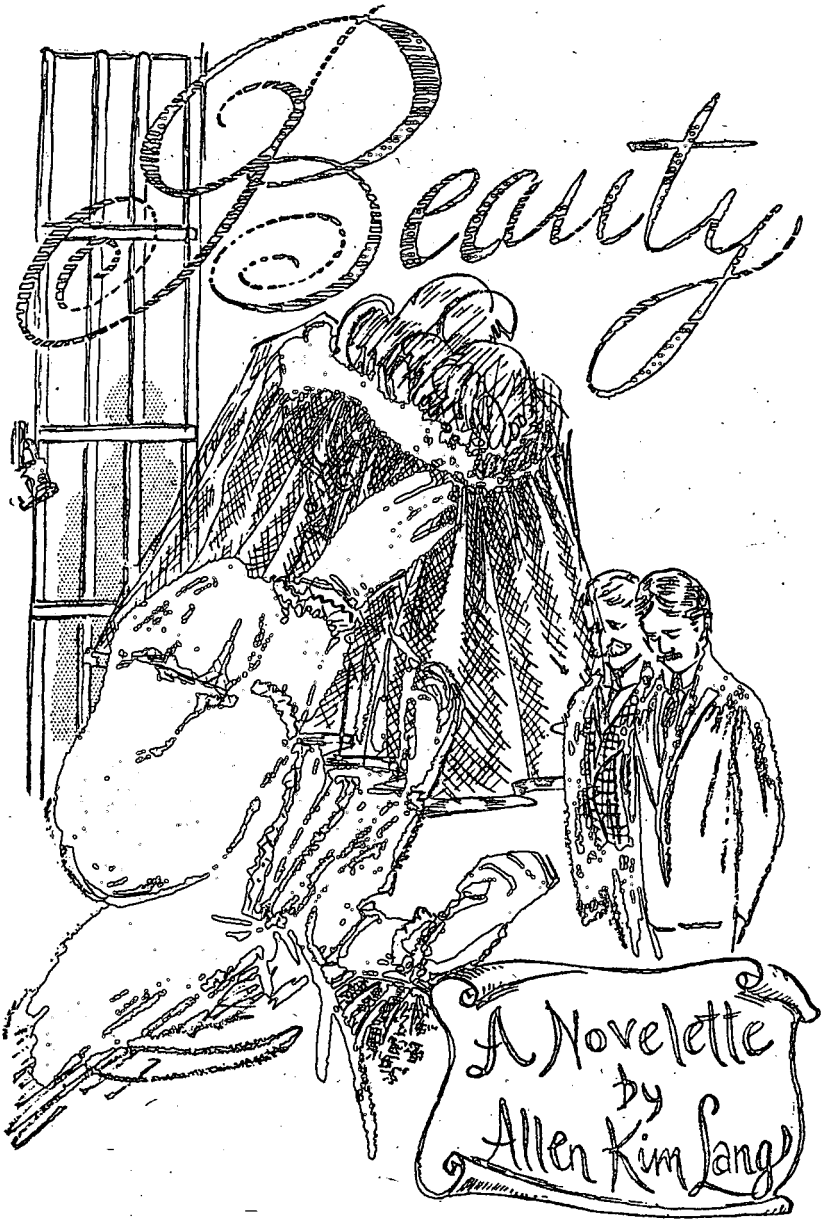

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I FIRST saw Miss Laetitia on the day she met the dog beneath my office window.

I was waiting for a patient. For two bits or a pair of chickens I'd undertake to cure him of water-brash, whitlow, or what-have-you, using all the knowledge and skill two years at Ohio Eclectic Medical College had given me. So far, I'd seldom had the chance. Pottawattomie's two other doctors were grey-templed, tested, ample of beard. I gazed out my window and mused on careless axes and runaway geldings and falls from the roofs of barns; on all those acts of God and man my month-old diploma sanctioned me to succor.

I wasn't bad off, really. I'd gotten an excellent ham a couple of days ago for curetting the pilonidal cyst that had made the seat of its victim's harrow a harrowing seat indeed. I could eat, if tritely, for weeks; with the office-rent paid I could sleep well out of the rain. Juniper, my tired grey mare, had her stable and feed. The only necessities of life I lacked were work and a loving woman.

While I waited for these desiderata to appear, I leaned on the window-ledge, relishing the breeze and the sunlight and the brisk vegetarian stink of horse. "Mornin', Doc!" a friend called, distressingly healthy and strong of voice. I

In the old legend, Beauty charmed the Beast, and her Beauty was exceeded only by her Virtue and the goodness of her heart. This is a variation on the old theme, with different overtones; and it is further complicated by decidedly different development and a different ending.

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waved back, looking anxiously past my well-wisher for my limping, grey-faced, splinted, hopeful-eyed first patient of the week.

George Jaxtheimer, town rakehell, stepped from the door of the Adeline Restaurant. Tiberius, his great Dane, huge and black, stood up and stretched. George waved his bowler to me, then tipped the hat in salute to Miss Maria Hernandez, the waitress. Tiberius sat down, bored with his master's monkeyshines. George pantomimed to Miss Hernandez his anguish at leaving her. He puckered and winked and curled his black mustaches like a road-company Legree. He danced and jig-stepped toward and away from the delighted girl. Finished, George bowed, first to Maria, then to me; right foot behind his left, his hat tucked primly against his belly.

Tiberius ignored George's buffooneries. More exciting game was bumping down the street. The great Dane barked a single-syllable bark, staring toward the remarkable wayfarer who approached.

She was wheeling over Main Street's glazed bricks on one of the new-fashioned "safety" bicycles that were so abridging the bone-setting trade, one whose wheels were of matching size. The young lady rode her vehicle with aplomb. Her lovely chin was held high, her back straight. Her gloved hands arched precisely down upon the handlebars. She wore on her head a straw boater with a yellow silk ribbon. Over her jabot-fluted shirtwaist was a yellow-and-black-checkerboard jacket. Her feet were shod in shoes that buttoned two inches above the ankle. The garment that had aroused the big dog's apprehension, however, was the famous invention of Amelia Jenks Bloomer, flapping in the breeze of the 'cycle's progress like twin banners of Progress.

Tiberius barked again. He quivered, his thighs set hard and his muzzle strained toward the bicycle. George gathered himself sufficiently to tip his bowler.

The girl cycled on, the bloomers striding up and down over the pedals in the firm but determined manner prescribed for lady velocipedists in *Godey's Lady's Book*. She ignored me as I peered down from my second-story window. She gave no sign of having heard the impertinent dog, and she looked through the masher, George.

Tiberius rumbled a growl. George pushed him back on his haunches. The girl's bicycle, betraying her frayed nerves in the manner later utilized in the design of mechanical lie-detectors, wobbled. The great Dane, a cast-iron lawn-ornament under his master's

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hand, yelped a disaster-warning. The girl's elbows lifted as she struggled to balance her vehicle.

Tiberius' lovely victim tottered, her tender skin threatened by rude bricks, her clothing menaced by the reminders of a hundred horses. George, a grin stretching his mustache across his brown face like a piece of black elastic, grasped the handlebars. The girl disengaged herself from her fickle machine only to discover—so cleverly had George disposed his forces—that she'd stepped into a circle patrolled by the monster Tiberius, and bounded by George's arms.

From this shelter the girl gazed at the dog with an apprehension natural to mortal flesh. Tiberius lolled out his tongue. George guided the lady's hand to the crown of the great Dane's head. The lady smiled. The dog smiled. George smiled. I, already jealous, was unamused.

Miss Maria Hernandez had also watched this bicycle-waltz. As the quartet of dancers—dog, man, girl, and bicycle—walked together around the corner, there came from within the Adeline Restaurant a crash of coffee-cups testifying to the wrath of a woman taken lightly.

By cautious questioning I determined that the bicycle-lady was Miss Laetitia Sargent, the new Instructress in Latin at the Pottawattomie Seminary for Girls. *Amo, amas, amat,* I thought. Against my breastbone I still felt the ache that had begun there the moment I first beheld Miss Laetitia on her safety-'cycle.

George Jaxtheimer had finessed me with his randy charm; his impudent, black Great Dane; and having been Johnny-on-the-spot. More threatening still to my dreams of enjoying private lessons in Latin was George's likely succession, after his older brother Ernst, to the Jaxtheimer Beer fortune.

Felix Jaxtheimer's beer, strong and genuine as his accent, had made him the richest man in our town. After building a mansion atop Pottawattomie's tallest residential peak, George's father had died in the saddle, sluicing down with his own lager a supper of *Schweineohren mit Sauerkraut.* Ernst, George's brother, had taken over the brewery, hop-sacks and purse-strings.

This Ernst was a driver. Only his line-of-duty samplings of the product (for no laboratory can match the analytic delicacy of a *Bierschmecker's* palate) kept him plump. He sustained his flesh on less than the six dollars a week he paid his greenest vatscourer; he worked the hours of an Alger newsboy. Trying to reform George,

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Ernst would recall the Aesopian fable of the grasshopper and the ant, casting his playboy brother in the former role and himself as the sedulous pismire. George, bored by tales of insect behavior, continued nightly investigations of the human species.

Example and precept failing, Ernst endeavored to anchor George's fancies to earth by paying him, as nominal Sales-Manager of the brewery, thirty dollars a week. Though princely for its day, this salary could hardly support George's wardrobe, which required frequent replenishing by first-class Chicago haberdashers; his thirst for fine wines; his steak-eating great Dane; and his two horses.

Somehow George paid his bills.

Despite my prayers, presumably matched by those of the deposed waitress, George Jaxtheimer and Laetitia Sargent hit it off famously together. Of a Sunday morning, returning home after a frantic midnight summons, I might see Laetitia, seated beside George in his scarlet-trimmed tilbury, rattling off to a picnic-lunch in the park, with Tiberius trotting alongside like a spare horse. Or, attending an evening of Chautauqua, I'd glower at the two of them, whispering deliciously over a program while I sat celibate and alone. Deaf to wisdom from the platform, I would contrast the felicity enjoyed by George Jaxtheimer, a parasite supported by beer, with my own harsh unreward.

For all this, I felt that George's comeuppance smacked of unnecessary roughness.

The money he'd been filching to support his tastes had left holes in the brewery's financial fabric that not all his guile and boyishness could hide. When Ernst, too long his brother's keeper, saw the tatters George had made of the brewery's profits, he burst into George's apartment, three hundred pounds of outraged Braumeister. Under his arm were the account-books that witnessed, in freshly-audited black-and-red, the tale of the younger man's rascality.

Tiberius lay on the Alaskan bearskin in front of the fireplace, his uncropped ears half-lifted as he watched his master shake fists and trade curses with Ernst. George had been drinking. He was in poor humor to listen as Ernst called down the wrath of heaven. When Ernst waved the ledgers under his nose and promised to force him onto the unskilled-labor market, George stepped across the recumbent great Dane, plucked the spring-handled brass poker from the scuttle next the fire, and whipped it against both sides of his brother's head.

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Later, ear-witnesses said they'd heard Tiberius barking. The fact that the dog had no blood on him testified that he'd left the immediate scene of the crime. The bearskin, the battleground proper, was so matted with blood that only a pathologist could have viewed it without flinching.

George belted another drink and his dressing-gown, then took Tiberius out to stand in the breeze. When some of the bourbon had evaporated from his brain, he walked the dog over to the office of Sheriff Clague, carrying like a swagger-stick the bloodied poker with which he'd smashed his brother's skull.

My older colleagues were out of town on simultaneous farm-calls; I was requested to conduct the examination of the decedent. It required no special skill to establish the cause of Ernst's death. The bones on each side of his head were crushed. The bearskin, over which several quarts of blood had spilled, bore mute witness to the slaughter. Under the dead man's belly, shielded from the carnage, lay the damning ledgers.

Ernst was decidedly dead, and George was as decidedly his murderer. To ratify this verdict of common sense, the machinery of the State set about to try, judge, and hang George Jaxtheimer with a minimum of fuss and notoriety. There was at the trial no forensic gadgetry, no magnified photos of fingerprints, no references to the M'Naghten Rule. It was black-robed, hard-nosed Law there in the Pottawattomie County Courtroom, as sterile and ruthless as surgery. The verdict of the jury was Guilty. The sentence of the Judge was:

That George Jaxtheimer, Murderer, be taken by the Sheriff of Pottawattomie County to a convenient location within said County, where, upon a structure to be erected for that purpose, and at one hour before dawn on a certain Monday in July, his cervical vertebrae should be dislocated by the hearty application of a hempen knot.

George bore himself, as the saying goes, cheerfully as could be expected under the circumstances. He was even able to grin at the pale face of Sheriff Clague, the man required by law to trim George's collar, fit the noose-knot under his left ear, and jerk the lanyard that would bounce his skull free from the rest of his skeleton.

George had been given some six weeks in which to tidy up his mundane affairs and attend to his spiritual parts. Never much of a hand for theology, he addressed himself to improving his quarters.

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A doorway was chiseled through the bullpen's wall to the cell adjoining, which was fitted with the pipes and drains and vitreous ware that would spare George the indignity of portable plumbing. The enamel receptacle freed by this enterprise he kept filled with chipped ice and brown bottles of Jaxtheimer Beer, for the refreshment of his guests.

A tier of bookshelves was suspended from the cell's ceiling on silken ropes. The brick walls were covered by two coats of paint. A nude of the pink, opulent sort popular in bars was hung. George's bed, adorned by a confection of silk and eiderdown, was set behind a Chinese screen. His feet were cushioned against the concrete floor by a Kidderminster carpet. Old Felix's patent-leather chair had been carted down Jaxtheimer Hill so that George might be comfortable when receiving callers. Often I was one of these.

An especial attraction of the Jaxtheimer cell was the opportunity there of reviewing the charms of Miss Maria Hernandez. Maria, who seemed to bear George no rancor for his friendship with Laetitia Sargent, served as waitress for the meals she brought under serving-bells from the Adeline Restaurant. Her progress around the table was a most attractive accompaniment to a meal, a symphony of flexures of womanly musculature. Our implements were silver, the dining-table walnut. The cloth was Irish linen, the china Spode. George drank his Madeira, and I my Jaxtheimer Beer, from Italian crystal. Were there not steel bars across the window, we might have been dining in one of Chicago's better clubs.

One such evening I remember well. Miss Hernandez filled our glasses and served our steaks, undulating from task to task with a grace to which only the dog was immune. George took a dollar note from his wallet and slipped it down her decolletage. "That will be all for now, Maria," he said. "I wish to speak privately with the Doctor."

"Sí," said Miss Hernandez, as sparing with words as she was lavish with movement. She collected our sauce-dishes and coffee-cups and called Sheriff Clague to release her from the cell.

George pared a ribbon of fat from his steak and tossed it to Tiberius. "Being condemned to death is hell on a man's social relationships, Doc," he said. "People who visit me stand around in a blue funk, lugubrious and prayerful as though I'd just thrown off a halo. You and Maria are the only people in Pottawattomie who treat me like

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the scoundrel I am." He reached back into the ice-filled chamber-pot to get me a fresh bottle of beer. "You're the only sensible man in town. That's why I feel free to ask you to do me a favor.

"With two exceptions, Doc, I've tasted every good thing there is in life. Those two are these: I've never enjoyed employment in a war, having been seven years short of conception at the time of Appomattox; and I've missed the pleasure of raising a family."

I laughed. "I've delivered half a dozen youngsters who look a devilish lot more like you than their pappy-of-record," I said.

George grinned. "I've got a loving nature. No, Doc; I want to give my name to a son, even though I'll never meet the kid."

"Who do you have in mind to share this philoprogenitive project with you?" I asked. "Miss Hernandez?"

"Laetitia."

"You're insane."

"I want you to be best man at our wedding, Doc," George said. "Friend Clague can stage-manage a passable hanging, I suppose; but I'd rather have a man of taste to hand me the ring at my wedding."

I crumpled my napkin and stood. "No, George," I said.

"With or without you, I'll have this marriage," he said. "I'd like to have you, Doc. And Laetitia would appreciate your helping."

I berated George Jaxtheimer with every name I could lay tongue to, but he stuck to his intention to marry Laetitia and get her with child. "She'll be a wealthy woman when my neck snaps," he said. "She'll have an income of something like thirty thousand dollars a year. Fair enough, Doc?"

"Damn' little payment for life as a hempen widow," I said. "George, I'd delight in throttling you."

He smiled. "That pleasure is the prerequisite of Sheriff Clague," he said. "Laetitia won't get too bad a shake, marrying me. The instant the gaseous George Jaxtheimer has been jerked from this carnal envelope, she'll be the richest woman in Pottawattomie County." He paused. "More to the point, Doc, she loves me."

And what could I say to that?

George poured bourbon and raised his glass. "*Happy Days* would hardly be the felicitous salute for this occasion," he said. "So, *Here's to the Bride!*"

I tasted George's toast with bitterness. I had hoped that once George had been hanged and mourned, Laetitia might seek consolation with me. But if she were to become Mrs. George Jaxtheimer, and his heiress, she would be as effectively denied me as though

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she'd gone to Japan. As the mother of another man's child, Laetitia would be no less dear to me. As the richest woman in town, honor would not allow me to approach her. Such is the male intelligence in youth.

The wedding, the first of the two public ceremonies designed to make a widow of Laetitia Sargent, was scheduled for the Saturday two days before the second, George's execution, the following Monday.

Easily the most talked-about social event of the season, these ante-mortem nuptials were gossiped over at length—though not with me. I had to bloody the nose of a slack-mouth whom I overheard suggesting that George Jaxtheimer's last-minute retirement from bachelorhood was only a device to legitimize matters discharged in his hours of freedom. If I couldn't have Laetitia for my wife, I would serve paladin to her good name.

The engagement ran five days. The jail was scrubbed till it smelled of soap and antiseptic. Mrs. Clague, as considerate of the young couple's interests as if she were the mother of the bride instead of the wife of the executioner-designate, stitched a set of draperies for the bullpen, which was to serve both as bridal-bower and death-cell. Canary-yellow silk, Mrs. Clague's draperies covered the outside window, made a curtain for the bathroom-annex, and fell over the steel-barred door. During each day of the engagement, in the hours Tiberius was out for his constitutional with a boy hired as his companion, Laetitia visited George; and the canary-yellow curtains were drawn to allow them to discuss their wedding plans in privacy.

Because of my duties as best man, I saw George oftener than I'd have liked. He was as cheerful as though his honeymoon-trip led across the Riviera, instead of over the trap of a gallows. Laetitia, despite dark crescents beneath her eyes and a loss of weight that my lover's-doctor's eye viewed with alarm, was able to present an aspect of gaiety remarkable in a bride-to-be whose trousseau was largely black.

The largest Chicago paper sent a lady reporter to cover the wedding, the leading sob-sister of her day. The streets on all sides of Courthouse Square began to fill Friday evening. Beneath the yellow-silk square of light, cross-hatched with bars, stood the fifteen members of the Jaxtheimer Brewery Band, ready to hail Laetitia, arriving in the cell for her evening visit, with every schmaltzy hearts-and-flowers number in the German-band tradi-

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tion. Tiberius, out for a walk, wore on his head a crown of roses, gift of a lady admirer.

After Miss Laetitia returned home, escorted by Sheriff Clague, George Jaxtheimer made a gesture that would have won him Full Pardon, could such have been obtained by popular petition: He ordered his Brewery Manager to place kegs of Jaxtheimer Lager at all corners of the Courthouse like a ring of defending mortars, to quench the civic thirst occasioned in celebrating his nuptials. The Brewery Band quaffed deeply. Their audience matched them stein for stein. "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow" was sung often enough to satisfy the most fervent admirer of that anthem. Three fights during the evening resulted in traumata severe enough to require my surgical intervention. The tuba collapsed well before midnight, overcome by internal ferments during the eleventh chorus of "Auf'm Berg Steht Ein Schloss." The surviving members of the band blew and banged and imbibed their corporate product until one-thirty, when, the kegs gone dry, they signaled the end of the party with the strains of "Good Night, Ladies." The day of the wedding was a perfect Hoosier Summer day. Several of last night's beer-drinkers, whom Sheriff Clague had incarcerated to preserve the early-morning peace, were set to work sweeping and scrubbing the streets they'd helped defile. They loaded the empty beer-kegs aboard a wagon sent over from the brewery. About noon another cart pulled up on the north side of the Courthouse, the side away from George's cell. The same prisoners were put to work unloading a pile of pine lumber. I watched as a sheriff from down state, imported by Clague as technical advisor, directed four local carpenters in constructing a one-man gallows; Jaxtheimer's last stand.

The wedding had been set for two in the afternoon. We who were to participate assembled in the corridors of the Courthouse to be rehearsed. With sardonic humor, George had chosen to perform the ceremony none other than the Judge who'd sentenced him to hang. I, of course, was best man; Mrs. Sheriff Clague was matron of honor, organist, and a witness; the Sheriff was the second witness. An unofficial member of the party, underfoot throughout, was Tiberius.

Sheriff Clague, Sunday-suited and brilliantined to a high gloss, unlocked George's cell. Mrs. Clague, who'd caused the parlor organ to be rolled in from her living-room athwart the jail, sat at it, plump in crinoline, pumping the

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pedals and pulling the stops. Her eyes were red as she played the National Anthem, one of the two tunes, it developed, that she knew well enough to perform in public. Through the Courthouse, from the quadrangle on the north side where in season Militia marched and fireworks burst, came the rapping of four hammers, busy at the groom's gallows, beating an obligato to Mrs. Clague's patriotic music. The Judge muttered into my ear, "Gallows-carpentry makes a poor wedding-march. George can't have much stomach for marrying, with that mortal knocking in his ears."

To the accompaniment of the organ, Laetitia Sargent, my forever-lost darling, walked firmly to the cell-door, avoiding an encounter between the train of her gown and the honor-guard of cuspidors that stood along both walls. She held to her bosom a bouquet of yellow roses. Tiberius eeled into the cell before her, and stood beside his master to make her welcome.

Laetitia's gown was white, high-collared, finished at the neck with an accordion pleat of lace. The sleeves, I remember, puffed down from her shoulders with the fantastic effect of angel-wings. She wore a hat held in place by a nexus of bayonette-like pins; dangerous, I thought, in the crowded cell. Crinkled to the top of the hat were folds of white veiling. She gazed at me a moment, then took Sheriff Clague's arm to be escorted in to her doomed groom.

George was dressed with a posh that made the rest of us look like poor relations. My reflecting mem-

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ory cannot reproduce his picture so brightly as Laetitia's, but I recall thinking that the blue-diamond stickpin in his tie cost more than I'd make in three years' boil-lancing and baby-snatching. The seventh member of our party, Tiberius, still wore the now wilted crown of roses that he'd been awarded the day before.

As Mrs. Clague abandoned the National Anthem to commence the other half of her repertoire, a hymn-tune, the dog stalked behind the Chinese screen. The bed-spring creaked as he settled down to audit the ceremony. I recognized the tune our organist was playing. Appropriately enough, it was, "I'll Be Waiting At the River." The wheeze and snore of the organ's reeds helped mask the hammer-blows echoing through the Courthouse from the half-built gallows outside.

Then the organ fell silent, and Mrs. Clague stood outside the bars to witness Laetitia's marriage to George Jaxtheimer.

The Judge pronounced the wedding-lines as briskly as he'd read off the order for George's hanging. I brought forth the ring on cue; all the magic words were said; the now man-and-wife embraced; and Mrs. Clague returned to the organ to pump out the gayer of her two numbers. George produced champagne, for the reception must be held in the same barred precincts as the wedding, if the groom were to attend. As the first cork popped, a hoarse many-voiced cheer rose outside. The Jaxtheimer Brewery Band, waiting under the window, burst into the wedding-march from *Lohengrin,* doing well for all its fifteen hangovers.

Sheriff Clague stood at the cell-door, coaxing the guests out. I shook hands with the husband but did not feel enough in mastery of myself to risk kissing the bride's lips. Instead I kissed her hand, not at all in the European manner, but in a spontaneous gesture of my compassion. Then I too left, taking Tiberius with me. The door clicked shut. Clague checked to make sure it had locked. From inside one of the prisoners drew the yellow curtains upon their caged seclusion.

The crowd in the streets was maudlin with beer and sympathy. As I crossed the Square, Tiberius trotting beside me, I heard a deep-throated "Thunk!" like the blow of a giant mallet. It was the imported sheriff testing the trap of George's gallows. I hied me to the next saloon and had several drinks more than my limit, while someone gave Tiberius a large bowl of beer. The dog got drunk, and I lost the rest of my day in a swamp of

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maudlin, muddle-headed sentiment.

Sheriff Clague was generous with George's last moments, allowing Laetitia as much time in the cell as she wished. From time to time other visitors appeared to fumble at goodbyes to George and to try to console the time-haunted bride.

Their last night, Sunday, the newlyweds parted. For all her courage, Laetitia could not support the thought of sending her husband from their nuptial-bed to the gallows. After she'd left, past midnight, Sheriff Clague came to my office to say George wanted to see me.

The condemned cell had been redecorated in a mournful attempt at domesticity. The item of furniture most conspicuously missing was a clock.

George's last concern, I was touched to learn, was for Laetitia. For the first time since I'd met him, he was entirely serious. "I've loved her more every moment," he told me. "Laetitia is the one sweet thing in life I find it hardest to relinquish." He poured us each a stiff dollop of bourbon. "I trust you more than any other man in Pottawattomie, Doc," he said. "That's why I've named you executor of my estate."

"You'd do better to make your lawyer your executor," I said.

George snorted. "Because I gambled my life with that lawyer, I'll stand on a trap this morning with my head in a black silk sack," he said. "I won't gamble the future of my Laetitia and my son."

"I'll do what I can."

George handed me a slip of paper on which was written a nine-digit number. "That's half a million dollars," he said. "When they have cut me down, go up to the house on the hill and open the safe. It's behind the portrait of Old Felix in the library; you can't miss Papa. I've sold my equity in the brewery and everything else I own except the house. It's all in that safe. Help Laetitia handle the money wisely, Doc. I want her and our boy to have a good life."

I didn't protest George's gesture, handing half a million dollars' worth of responsibility to me, a man whose income came from buck-a-visit housecalls, 50¢-extra-each-mile-over-four. I could hire a banker if I had to.

So I accepted stewardship over the woman I loved, pledging myself to be forever a sort of elder brother. I had a final drink, shook hands with George for the last time, tucked the half-million-dollar slip of paper into my wallet, and called for Clague to let me out of the death-cell. The prisoner went to bed for his last hour on earth.

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Tiberius slept beside him, on the floor.

Sheriff Clague, bearing in mind that the Judge had set George's death to fall one hour before the dawn, had determined from the almanac that the sun rose that day at 4:56. We who were concerned with the putting-away of the condemned man met at 3:00 on the steps of the Courthouse. The sheriff from downstate, second lead in the fatal drama, bore on his breath rather more alcohol than is commonly drunk at breakfast.

"The man we're sending off this morning weighs about a hundred-eighty pounds," the guest expert explained. "I'm gonna use a three-quarter-inch, five-strand rope—that's the best for men; four strands will hold your average woman—and give him a five-foot drop. I'm usin' my own rope, you notice." He demonstrated to us the length of hemp he'd reserved for George's use, and explained how he'd stretched it by suspending overnight a two-hundred-pound sandbag, this to remove any annoying springiness. Sheriff Clague missed much of the technical exposition by going back to his office to be sick. By the time he'd come back I'd indicated to the hangman my distaste for his art and he was back re-testing his machine, setting the trap afresh, tying his knot of office in sullen, wounded silence.

"Didn't sleep a wink last night, Doc," Clague told me. "George did, though. When I went in to get him just now he was snoring like to wake the dead."

"Why'd you wake him so early?" I demanded. "The least you could do would be to grab him quick, and hang him while he's still half-asleep."

"George said he wants to say goodbye to his Missus," Clague said. "She better get a move on." It was now 3:40, sixteen minutes before George's neck was to be broken. I paced the hall, my fists deep in my pockets. My spirits were not lifted when the front door opened to admit Laetitia.

She was heavily veiled, as befitted a woman who'd be a widow within the quarter-hour. Her voice was firm. "Sheriff, I wish to see my husband," she said. "You will please allow us several moments together in private."

Clague glanced at Laetitia's purse. "I'll have to have your word, Mrs. Jaxtheimer, that you won't help the prisoner do himself a mischief."

"I have no intention of becoming an accessory to suicide," Laetitia said. "Do you wish to search me for lethal contraband?"

"No, ma'm," Clague said. "Come right along. We ain't got much

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time left." He unbolted George's door, glanced in to establish that his prisoner was still fit enough to play his part in the ceremony preparing out front, then let Laetitia in. "You got ten minutes," he said.

"Come on, Clague." I took his arm to draw him down the corridor out of earshot, allowing the lovers their moment of farewell.

At five minutes till four, Clague strode back to the cell-door and unlocked it. His hands trembled so that the key chattered in the lock. Down the hall came the hanging sheriff, with the minister retained by the State to console her victim. "Come on out now, Mrs. Jaxtheimer," Clague said.

Laetitia, her veil down over her face, one glove hand pressed against it as though weeping, hurried past us. When I essayed to put a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder she shrugged away from me, and strode to the door as though afraid that another moment in the presence of her husband's killers would prove intolerable.

It was high time to get the man hanged. Clague and the imported sheriff entered the death-cell together, the minister trailing them, his face green above his ecclesiastical collar.

"Doc!" Clague called. I hurried into the cell, brushing aside the canary-colored curtains.

George was stretched unconscious over his bunk, his knees on the floor, his hands thrown over his head onto the bed. "We'll have to tote him out tied to a chair," the downstate sheriff grunted.

"Shut up," I said.

"He was praying," the minister said.

I bent at the bedside to lift George's head. The tan on the unconscious face came off on my fingertips. I touched the mustache. It was still damp. The skin beneath, where I slicked off the stove-blacking, was fair and smooth as shot-silk. "Will someone please get me a glass of water?" I asked.

"He don't need water. He needs a boot in the tail," the executioner said.

Sheriff Clague handed me a glass of water. I damped my handkerchief and applied it to our actress' face. The mustache washed off easily, as did the rest of the tan. Laetitia moaned and shook her head against the blanket.

"I'm damned!" Clague shouted. "It's Laetitia Sargent!"

She opened her eyes. "No," she said. "It's Laetitia Jaxtheimer." She turned to me. "Is George gone?"

"So far," I said. We both smiled, as our eyes met.

"Thank God," Laetitia said.

Sheriff Clague stared at her, at

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the crudely-cut hair, stained black with the same stove-dye that had given her a mustache. He looked at the man's clothing she wore, pinched here and bagging there over Laetitia's unambiguously female figure. He looked under the bed, working his jaws as though chewing a large and bitter cud. Laetitia's hair was there, shorn blonde locks strewn about where George had kicked them after his franctic barbering. "That was George that went out, wearing your clothes," Clague wheezed. "You promised you wouldn't help George cheat the law."

Laetitia lifted her head. She wiped her eyes with the limp-hanging sleeve of the jacket she wore. "I promised I'd not help kill a man," she said. "I've not. I've saved a man's life."

"Get him!" the downstate sheriff shouted. "He'll be heading for the railroad station."

Clague and the hangman scampered out into the street in front of the Courthouse. It was five minutes before they found a buggy, five more before they'd commandeered and hitched-up a horse. Hellbent and shouting, waking citizens along their route, the two sheriffs sped to the station, cursing their unbreakfasted steed as though it had been a party to the plot to free George Jaxtheimer.

The station agent stood on the platform, gazing after the plume of smoke to the westward. "Damnedest thing I ever did see," he told the sheriffs. "Fellow all done up in black came ridin' up a minute ago, pedallin' a bicycle like he's losin' a race to the Devil."

"Where'd he go?" Clague demanded.

"Can't say," the agent said. "He didn't buy a ticket." The station agent consulted his pocket watch. "Might be goin' to Chicago, though. Caught the 4:02. Right on time, by golly."

"Telegraph ahead," Clague snapped. "Have that man seized."

"Like to accommodate you," the agent said. He pointed to a gap in the westward wires. "Last thing that fellow did was grab aholt of a stake from a baggage-car and pull himself off a hunk of wire. Just like with a pruning-hook."

Sheriff Clague ordered the wire repaired. After a quarter-hour's work jury-rigging a jump across the gap, the station agent reported that he still couldn't pull Monon, the next station west. "He could of tore down more wire at the junction," he suggested. "The trains slow down there to about as fast as a sick mule walks. You want me to take a handcar and go look?"

Clague profanely dismissed this

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research as academic. He and the frustrated executioner seized command of the ancient switch-engine building steam at the siding, the fires hardly into its coals. They pointed down the track and shouted at the locomotive's engineer, as little awake as his vehicle. He demurred to follow. His fireman was off somewhere seeking breakfast. Clague called the station agent, suggesting he take upon himself the civic duty of becoming a temporary fireman. The agent declined. Cursing in boldface, Clague climbed into the locomotive cab and picked up the scoop-shovel.

The old engine puffed westward in slow motion. From Pottawattomie to Monon, Clague heaved bituminous vituperously. The other sheriff, offered use of the shovel, made the point that he'd been hired to hang, not stoke. The engineer argued that his craft was one no sheriff could master in less than several years, and that his trained hand was needed on the throttle. By the time they chugged into Monon, Clague was streaming minstrel makeup and wincing each time his raw palms closed on the shovel-handle. George Jaxtheimer was by then well en route to Chicago, having caught the six o'clock Cannonball. Sheriff Clague, fingering the silver star pinned to his coal-grimed shirt, stood in the roadbed between ties, staring westward, where his hopes of re-election had disappeared.

Laetitia, though for the time being incarcerated in George's old cell, was the toast of Pottawattomie. The music-lovers who'd heard Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* compared her to Lenore, who by her courage struck oppression's chains from her husband's limbs. In the poolhalls and barrooms the town's less cultured citizens applauded, round after round, Laetitia's gallant spirit. The Jaxtheimer Brewery Band, no longer restrained by good taste or impending execution, foregathered beneath the yellow-silk-curtained window to serenade their heroine till all hours. To thank the musicians for their marches, waltzes, "Old Dan Tucker," and all the rest, Laetitia distributed between the bars her bridal bouquet, tossing it down rose by yellow rose.

Poor Clague, unwilling Don Pizarro of the piece, caught catcalls from orchestra and gallery alike. The Governor fired up a heads-will-roll telegram from Indianapolis. The Pottawattomie County Prosecuting Attorney, jealous of the scalp that had been snatched from his trophy-belt, visited Laetitia in her cell in search of testimony to support proceedings against Sheriff Clague for mal-

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feasance of office. The executioner-designate, his rope coiled gloomily in his suitcase, filed suit for his expenses, thoughtfully adding on a round-trip fare to Monon; and demanded the fifty-dollar hanging-fee he'd been cheated of by Clague's carelessness.

The Brewery Band, a yellow rose taped to the bell of every horn and tucked somewhere in the carrying-straps of each drum, arrived at the Sheriff's Office to play a concert of martial music and to demand that Laetitia Jaxtheimer be set free. When Mrs. Clague joined the chorus, the Sheriff abandoned his last hope of salvaging any honor from the wreckage, and let Laetitia go.

I couldn't have been happier about Goerge's cheating the rope had the fugitive neck been my own. Knowing him, though, I restrained my joy with the thought that not all the circumstances of his remarkable escape by safety-bicycle and steam-locomotive were yet public.

The day Laetitia was freed I went up the hill to the Jaxtheimer mansion. In the library I found the portrait of Old Felix, spit-and-image of what Kasier Bill was to look like twenty years later, and swung it aside to open the safe.

The safe was empty.

When I told Laetitia that the cupboard was bare she laughed. She'd taken George all the money on one of her connubial visits to his cell. His appointment of me as his executor was only part of the stage-machinery of his disappearance. George would call for her soon, Laetitia told me. He'd write a loving letter from the Yucatan or Venice; and she'd sail off to rejoin him. Meanwhile, would I care for a cup of tea?

I refused the tea and silenced my doubts. Patting Tiberius, I wished a wistful goodbye to the demi-widow and returned to my medical practice. I was confident that my career as executor of estates had ended.

Not so.

Some two weeks after Laetitia had made her bid to replace George on the hangman's rostrum I found my responsibilities renewed. Laetitia's maid brought the message. I was requested to attend her mistress at my earliest convenience. Not knowing whether I was needed as friend or as doctor, I tossed my bag into the buggy and hitched up Juniper to take me and the maid back up Jaxtheimer Hill.

Old Felix's mansion was a gingerbread castle worthy of the Brothers Grimm. Carpenter gothic, it was so hideous in its wooden borax, many-angled mansards, sil-

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ver doorplates, stained-glass portholes, spindles, turrets, fretted balconies, and walnut gargoyles that it had a sort of comic beauty. As I twisted the bell-key Tiberius set up a secondary belling within, a bray that could be heard anywhere within a mile of the hill. Laetitia let us in. Tiberius leaped on and mouthed me with a salivary enthusiasm that made me grateful I'd not elected to study veterinary medicine, much as I like dogs. The inside of the wooden wedding-cake, which seemed to have been designed for eventual haunting, was so cluttered with birds-under-belljars, antimacassared settees, mottoes in walnut frames, a grand piano, a grand staircase, cupboards, cabinets, trunks, tables, and chairs without number that it would have required an ingenious specter to have found room in which to rattle his chains. Tiberius snaked through this obstacle-course of Victoriana to the oval knit rug before the unlighted fireplace. "I'll have to get rid of that awful dog," Laetitia said. I looked at her as closely as the thin light, filtered through lavender lozenges set in the entryway transom, would allow. Despite a dusting of rice-powder, there were traces on Laetitia's cheeks of weeping. "Won't you sit down, Doctor?" she asked, pointing me to the library.

"Laetitia, what on earth is the matter?"

She twisted from me to face the portrait of Old Felix. "My husband trusted you, Doctor," she said. "The fact that George Jaxtheimer trusted a man is not, I've discovered, a very worthwhile testimonial. Were it not for some personal knowledge of your character, I would consider your friendship with George evidence of a moral stain." She sat on the sofa.

I sat on the chair across from Laetitia. "What has he done?"

She reached into her blouse for a letter, which she handed me without comment.

The envelope was postmarked Chicago. The address, scrawled in a handwriting that looked the work of a retarded child, was in pencil. The note inside was graphic and brief. It was a report from Maria Hernandez, late of the Adeline Restaurant, stating that she was now the sole custodian of the affections of George Jaxtheimer. Laetitia's correspondent went on to detail the precise nature of Laetitia's inadequacies as wife.

I balled up the note and set a match to it, tossing it and its envelope into the fireplace. "Tell me about it, Tish," I said.

"I did love him," she began. *"De gustibus non disputandum est.* You've watched ten-year-old boys?

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All brass and fireworks? That was George. An endless circus-parade, with the big bass drum of his self-conceit and the steam-calliope of his conversation. He even had a zoo; that damned, big dog over there. George Jaxtheimer was Ringmaster to the Universe. Enchanted by his virility, titillated by the prospects of fun his money would make available to us—such a charming couple!—amused by my darling scoundrel's pomp and panache." She paused. "It's disgusting to learn that one has been used."

Wanting to pull her to me and whisper comfort, to promise that I'd seek out the scoundrel George and beat him senseless, I stood instead and paced the library floor, so filled with adrenalin that Tiberius' hackles rose and he growled at me, who'd known him for months. "You planned the exchange in the jail-cell," I suggested.

"George did," she said. "I was overjoyed. I loved him. I would help him escape death, then we'd join in happy freedom. I was gay as a springtime schoolgirl, brave as Joan of Arc sassing the Bishop of Beauvais, all sick and rose-petalled with love." Laetitia dabbed at her nose with a tiny handkerchief. "So on that morning, with my bicycle left against the Courthouse wall, all our props and makeup ready in my handbag—stove-blacking for my mustache and hair, his heavy veil, and twine to twist around a pillow to make George a bust—we asked for a last moment of privacy. The last kiss before the grave, you know. Who could refuse us that? And the train was just east of town.

"The next ten minutes were mad. He clipped my hair as though he were trimming a hedge, smeared tan greasepaint on my face and hands. I painted on my mustache; George clipped his off. We helped one another into our costumes, grim and fearful of death in a farce that, except for the presence offstage of a genuine trap and rope and hangman, would have seemed most amusing.

"Then we played our comedy, the scene we'd rehearsed a hundred times. I, discovered praying at my bedside, making last-minute peace with Heaven. He, broken-hearted widow, fleeing the horror of a husband's death. I fainted, but no matter. George escaped. Having used me as his jailhouse doxy and a fellow-player in the farce, he took his money and his Spanish wench to Chicago. I wish that woman the comfort I've had of George Jaxtheimer."

"You knew when he left he'd taken all the money?" I asked.

"George said he'd need every

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penny to get us settled," she explained. "He would call me to join him as soon as it was safe to do so."

"I hope you'll forgive my asking so personal a question, Laetitia . . ." I began.

"No, Doctor. Our unfortunate union is not to be blessed with issue," she said.

"That relieves my mind," I said; "but isn't what I wished to ask. Tish, what do you have to live on?"

"My knowledge of the Latin tongue," she said. *"Non omnis moriar.* And I have this house, so huge that no one not a brewery-owner could afford its operation. Besides these two treasures I have Tiberius and a collection of bills representing every local retailer except, perhaps, the Bible-salesmen."

"What will you do?"

"Teach. What other sources of income does a deserted wife of George Jaxtheimer command, Doctor?"

"Is this house insured?" I asked her.

"For fifty thousand dollars," Laetitia said. "Everything but this flamboyant barn went to that tart." She was crying. I offered my arm. "Please," Laetitia said. "We can be friends only if you behave correctly, Doctor."

"Forgive me, Tish," I said; and collapsed limply into my chair.

"So what do you suggest I do?" she asked again.

"Consult a lawyer?"

"I have anticipated you," Laetitia said. "He informs me that I own this house and the ground it stands on, although taxes are payable in a month and the inflated insurance will require refreshing by year's end. I will be able to afford neither of these expenses on my Latin-teacher's pay; assuming, that is, that the school will take back so sullied an instructress. I fear that Sheriff Clague will be left to dispose of the Jaxtheimer Mansion, as he so markedly failed to dispose of its former master."

"Couldn't you sell the house, Tish?" I asked.

"To you, Doctor?" she asked.

Abashed, I shook my head. "I have some savings," I said cautiously. "If there's anything . . ."

Laetitia stood. "Doctor, this is not a plea for charity. Good morning."

I allowed myself to be escorted to and through the front door. As it closed behind me I gave vent to profanity that would have struck George dead in his tracks, if my curses had supernatural power. I got into the buggy and headed Juniper downhill toward my office, hatching en route the felony that would rescue dear Laetitia. If her

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white elephant were only cremated, her financial problems would be largely solved.

I chose for my crime a clouded night, a night on which Tish would have an alibi. She was at the school, where a playlet of her composition, titled with awful irony "Amor Omnia Vincit," was being presented by her pupils. I bundled my wicks and bottles of benzine into the buggy and gee'd Juniper up the rear of Jaxtheimer Hill. My first job at the doomed house would be to release Tiberius.

The gaunt white clapboards and the shutter on the central tower were etched sharp in the moonlight. I had started my cautious stalk of the place, carrying my incendiary materials, when something stopped me. It was the stink of kerosene-smoke in the air.

I dropped my guilty packages. From inside the house came a whimper, and the rattle of a heavy chain. Flame flashed up in the kitchen window, and the whimper became a scream. It was Tiberius; no lesser beast could have produced that howl of fear and pain. I clumped up the back-porch stairs and banged at the kitchen door. Locked. I lifted my foot and booted hard as I could. The door pushed into an ooze of smoke.

A tongue of flame licked out toward my face. I stumbled back to fill my lungs with clean air, then tried again to fight my way through the heat to the dog. The wooden lacework under the gables was afire now. The glass panes of the kitchen windows were tinkling from their frames.

I backed off, holding my hands over my streaming, blinded eyes, racking coughs. Tiberius screamed again. I was twenty feet from the house now, on the back lawn, held away by a bubble of heat. One final bleat came from the tortured dog. Then the kitchen roof collapsed, sending a pyrotechnic show of sparks toward the moon.

Downhill, the Pottawattomie fire-bell dinned, calling the Volunteer Company to hitch up. I remembered the stuff I'd dropped, coming to do the job someone else had begun, and hurried to grab up my rags and benzine. I vaulted the fence and rejoined Juniper. On my way back to the office I dropped the incendiaries off the bridge into Pottawattomie Creek.

I went back up the hill later. There was quite a showing at Tiberius' funeral-pyre. With a dying gasp the gleaming ashes, the white-hot strings of Old Felix's grand piano, the fractured marble of the staircase, all settled into the cellar with the calcined bones of George's great Dane.

Laetitia was conspicuously pres-

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ent. Her hair was disarrayed by her rush up the hill, but she still held in one hand a clipboard—doubtless her prompt-copy of "Amor Omnia Vincit"—as she stared at the rubbled house. I shucked my coat and draped it over her shoulders. "Terrible blow, Tish," I ventured.

"Oh, yes," she said. "How fortunate I am that the house was insured."

"I'm certain the company will pay off," I said. "Like clockwork."

"Clockwork?" Laetitia demanded.

"The settlement of your insurance-claim," I explained. "Did you know you'd left Tiberius chained? He burned to death."

"Such a pity. Doctor, I'm a bit chilled. Would you be so good as to escort me back down to the school?"

In the days that followed, I helped Laetitia get herself settled in a small house not far from the Pottawattomie Seminary for Girls. Tish's thanks were correct and Antarctic. She was as trustless of me, of all men, as though George Jaxtheimer, the only man she'd known in the ultimate role of masculinity, were the pattern of our sex. And George, of course, was a monster. Q.E.D.

It was a late Summer morning, some three weeks after the insurance company had grudgingly made Laetitia financially independent of Latin, when I met her new companion. As I approached our rendezvous, I saw that Tish was accompanied by a great Dane, black as Nordic hell, big as a racing-colt. Half a block away the dog announced me with a bark that rattled windows. As I drew nearer he tensed his forelimbs and planted himself between me and Laetitia like a mobile fortress. "Good morning, Doctor," Tish said. The dog growled. "Quiet, Caligula," she said.

The dog stood silent. "Caligula," I said. "If I remember Suetonius, that means Little Boots." I noticed that this great Dane's feet were indeed white, unlike Tiberius', which had been as black as the rest of him.

"I've got in the habit of Roman emperors," Laetitia explained. The dog was glaring up at me, trembling with the effort of obedience. Tish took my hand and pressed it on the great Dane's head. "The Doctor is a gentleman," she explained to the dog. Caligula barked an acknowledgement of our introduction.

We walked on toward the school. "It is remarkable how much Caligula resembles Tiberius," I said.

"It is no coincidence," Laetitia said. "Tiberius and Caligula were

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litter-mates. Caligula's white boots are the only markings by which you could tell him from his brother Tiberius."

"I'm amazed that you bought a second dog," I said.

"I could hardly get a cat. A cat is the cliché of the forlorn woman," she said, "and useless for defense. Caligula, by contrast, was trained by his former owner to be an excellent watchdog."

"You seemed so unmoved by Tiberius' death that I'd not considered you a dog-lover," I said.

"My only regret when Tiberius died," she said, "was that the barbecue involved George's beast, and not the beastly George. Caligula is a utility, Doctor. I somehow became irresistible to men the night my house burned down; the manufacturers of perfume might do well to bottle the smoke of well-insured houses. Several men, sniffing that smell, have announced themselves willing to share my life. The prospect does not charm me."

"So you bought a dog," I said.

"I purchased a large dog and a good revolver," Laetitia said. "Between the two, I hope to discourage the importunities of Pottawattomie's numerous male rabble. Good day, Doctor."

It was several days later that I saw a case out north of town. Thinking back on it, I feel certain the boy had poliomyelitis; but sanitation had not yet made polio common, so I diagnosed his symptoms as a teething-paralysis and worked in ignorance. It took most of the day from dawn to persuade the boy to live through sunset. Thanks more to the healing powers of nature than to me, he did live, though he limps to this day.

Riding home after my partial victory, I felt the evening to be almost indecently lovely. A mid-afternoon shower had settled the dust. Juniper plodded past fields of rank-stinking tomato-vines and sweet-scented clover, mint and giant sunflowers and corn taller than a tall man. I whistled, holding the reins, thinking of Tish, as we entered town. It was early enough for me to solicit a cup of tea from Laetitia without compromising her reputation. In a town like Pottawattomie, every man must be as circumspect as an unmarried preacher; and every woman as Caesar's wife, above suspicion.

I tied Juniper to a fence-post near the porch and picked Tish a bouquet of scarlet roses from her front yard. There was no reply to my first knock at the door so I tried again, louder.

From the rear of the house, where the kitchen was, I heard Laetitia's voice. "Nothing!" she

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was shouting. "Nothing at all!"

I shoved the front door open and ran through the house. The great Dane growled in the kitchen, a circular-saw ripping oak. A man screamed. The house shuddered as something hit the kitchen floor.

I dropped my stolen roses in the doorway and seized a frying-pan from its hook over the cook-stove. Caligula backed off from his kill without the skillet's persuasion, dripping a good deal of blood. I dropped the pan and knelt beside George Jaxtheimer. His throat was torn through to the windpipe. After a moment his hot blood no longer pulsed.

Gaius Caligula had just made Laetitia Jaxtheimer a proper widow. Puffing from his work, he trotted across the kitchen floor toward me, sure of a reward for having defended his mistress so nobly. The explosion rocked me back on my heels. Caligula's neck blossomed a scarlet rosette. The dog gurgled, kneeled, and died.

Laetitia held the revolver steady between her clasped hands, ready to fire again if the great Dane moved. I stood and took the gun from her. "What was George doing here?" I asked her.

"He was greedy," she said. "He came for the money I got from the house. I knew George would try to get it."

"Why did Caligula attack him?"

"Because I screamed," Laetitia said. "George came toward me with his hands raised; he's hit me before, you know. He didn't bother about Caligula's being in the room; he must have thought the dog was Tiberius. The two looked remarkably alike. When George touched me, Caligula leaped on him." She gazed at the gun I was holding. "Such a pity that I wasn't able to shoot Caligula in time to save George," she said.

I knelt beside Caligula and touched one of his black feet. I sniffed my fingers. Then I took a dish-cloth from the hanger and pumped cold water over it.

I sponged away the black stain painted on Caligula's hocks to hide his white boots. "Caligula looked very like Tiberius," I said, staring up at Laetitia. "When you'd painted over his boots with stove-blacking, the new dog looked exactly like the old one. That's why George felt so at ease with the strange dog."

I picked up the roses from the floor near Caligula's bloody head. Laetitia accepted the bouquet, a few petals of which were stained a darker red.

Bending, I gently kissed her lips. Then I walked outside, leaving Tish with the dead man and the corpse of the instrument she'd used to kill him.

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(Continued from other side)

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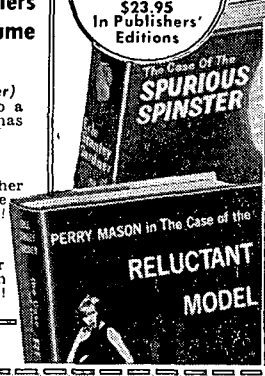

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